The New Criterion

November 1992

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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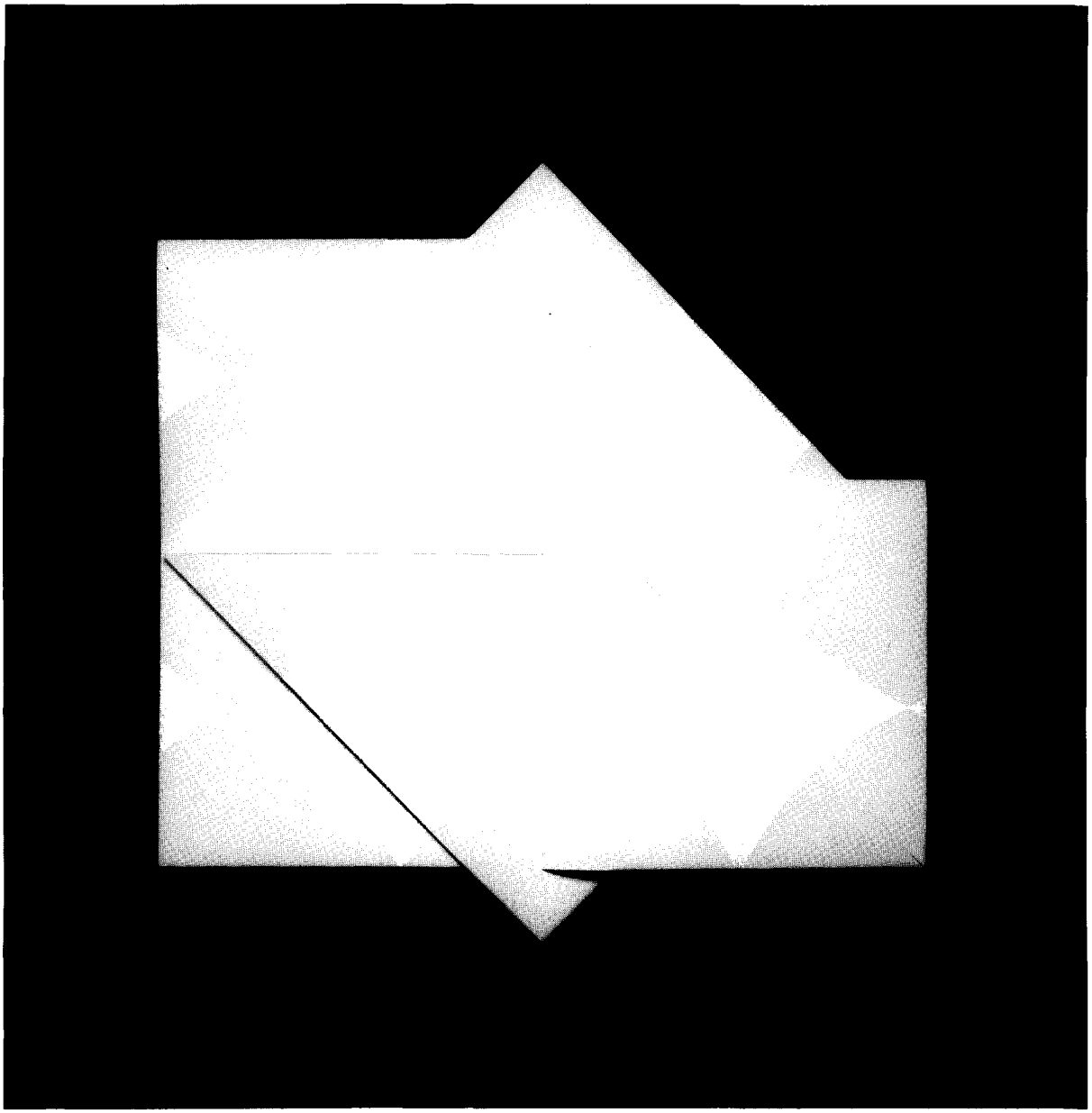

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The New Criterion *November 1992*

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Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. November 1992, Volume 11, Number 3. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. Copyright © 1992 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky, OH 44870. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date.

Advertising representative: Kate Shanley, 799 Broadway, Room 226, New York, NY 10003. (212) 477-4905.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set in 10-point Galliard with the Flexicon Composer from E-Type Design Associates, and is printed by Science Press in Ephrata, Pennsylvania.

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Notes & Comments: November 1992

Allan Bloom, 1930-1992

The death of Allan Bloom last month at the age of sixty-two deprived us of many things: a valued teacher, friend, and scholar, an extraordinarily effective and prescient critic of American higher education. It also deprived the cultural Left of a prime object of vilification and rage. Until the spring of 1987, when he published *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom had led the retiring life of a university professor. Best known to the scholarly community for his thoughtful translations-cum-commentaries of Plato's *Republic* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*, he was honored by his students and colleagues as a devoted teacher. The astonishing success of *The Closing of the American Mind* —the book is said to have sold over one million copies—propelled him to the center of national attention.

It also, after a few months of incredulous befuddlement in the academy, made him the victim of an extraordinary campaign of abuse and misrepresentation. The anathema brought down upon Bloom reads like a thesaurus of epithets compiled for the politically correct. He was racist; he was sexist; he was elitist; he was authoritarian; he was—sin of sins—"Eurocentric." Bloom was accused, moreover, of stupidity, ignorance, malevolence, bad scholarship, insensitivity, and political manipulation. One critic compared him to Oliver North; several summoned up the ghost of Senator Joseph McCarthy; one even discerned similarities between Bloom and Adolf Hitler. The cataract of calumny continues to this day.

In one respect, anyway, the reaction from the academy and the cultural Left was only to be expected. After all, not only was *The Closing of the American Mind* a powerful indictment of intellectual and moral corruption in the academy, it was also an indictment that struck a nerve with the public. Jobs, tenure, academic institutes, and college curricula might finally be subject to open scrutiny. Alumni might wonder why they should subsidize institutions devoted to repudiating the founding intellectual and political values of the United States. Parents might object to having their children battened on nihilistic word games and taught to regard traditional morality as a contemptible expression of narrow-mindedness and bigotry. Legislators might begin wondering if all was well in the ivory towers that taxpayers had so munificently endowed and accoutered. Indeed, those with a stake in politicizing intellectual life in the academy had much to fear from the publicity accorded to Bloom's book.

In the preface to his last book, a collection of essays called *Giants and Dwarfs* (1990), Bloom insisted that "the essence of educa-

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tion is the experience of greatness." Almost everything that he wrote about the university flowed from this fundamental conviction. And it was this, of course, that branded him an "elitist." In fact, Bloom's commitment to greatness was profoundly democratic. This is not to say that it was egalitarian. The true democrat wishes to share the great works of culture with all who are able to appreciate them; the egalitarian, recognizing that genuine excellence is rare, declares greatness a fraud and sets about obliterating distinctions. As Bloom recognized, the fruits of egalitarianism are ignorance, the habit of intellectual conformity, and the systematic subjection of cultural achievement to political criteria. In the university, this means classes devoted to pop novels, rock videos, and third-rate works chosen simply because their authors are members of the requisite sex, ethnic group, or social minority; it means students who graduate not having read Milton or Dante or Shakespeare—or, what is in some ways even worse, who have been taught to regard the works of such authors chiefly as hunting grounds for examples of patriarchy, homophobia, imperialism, etc., etc. It means faculty and students who regard education as an exercise in disillusionment and who look to the past only to corroborate their sense of superiority and self-satisfaction.

The other side of Bloom's commitment to greatness was his criticism of popular culture—more precisely, his criticism of the deliberate confusion of popular culture and high art. Among the many things that incensed his enemies, perhaps none so enraged them as his condemnation of rock music. "Rock music," he wrote, "provides premature ecstasy and, in this respect, is like the drugs with which it is allied. It artificially produces the exaltation naturally attached to the completion of the greatest endeavors —victory in a just war, consummated love, artistic creation, religious devotion and discovery of the truth." Bloom's point was difficult to credit even for some people who were otherwise sympathetic to his argument. How could rock be such a bad thing? Hasn't it become just one more middle-class entertainment, enjoyed by kids everywhere?

To be sure it has, as CD sales and the phenomenal success of MTV attest. But for Bloom that is precisely the problem. The fact that rock has been domesticated and commercialized, that it is now big business and mass entertainment, does not change its essential character. Its appeal is the appeal of the Dionysian: rock is anti-order, anti-verbal, anti-intellect. It is about unconstrained sexuality and polymorphous gratification. That is why its main enthusiasts are adolescents, young and old. They are right that rock music is a liberation: it is a liberation or vacation from civilization. In the deepest sense it is a liberation from music, whose essence is order. Bloom came down hard on rock because, like Plato, he understood the power of music to educate our emotions at the most basic level. Rock is an education for chaos and narcissism. There are, of course, many competing claims for a child's emotional allegiance; rock music is only one of a host of attractions besieging young people for attention. But because "the first sensuous experiences are decisive in determining the taste for the whole of life," Bloom was right to call attention to the dark, seductive side of rock music. "Nihilism," he observed, is often "revealed not so much in the firm lack of beliefs, but in the chaos of the instincts or passions."

Bloom's criticism of rock music was part of a larger attack on the 1960s, the decade that epitomized the radically egalitarian, liberationist ethos that wreaked such havoc on the university and on society at large. While he acknowledged and paid homage to the triumph of the civil-rights movement, he regarded the Sixties as "an unmitigated disaster" for intellectual and moral life in academia. This, too, won him the vitriol of the cultural Left, for whom the Sixties was a political Golden Age. Having lived through the student demonstrations at Cornell in

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1969, when black activists brandished guns and held university administrators hostage, Bloom knew otherwise. American society did not quite come apart at the seams, but Bloom was correct in seeing parallels between the American university in the Sixties and the German university in the Thirties. "The fact that in Germany the politics were of the Right and in the United States of the Left should not mislead us," he noted.

> In both places the universities gave way under the pressure of mass movements, and did so in large measure because they thought those movements possessed a moral truth superior to any the university could provide. Commitment was understood to be profounder than science, passion than reason, history than nature, the young than the old. . . . The unthinking hatred of "bourgeois society" was exactly the same in both places. A distinguished professor of political science proved this when he read to his radical students some speeches about what was to be done. They were enthusiastic until he informed them that the speeches were by Mussolini.

Looking back on this episode from the relatively quiescent time of the 1980s, Bloom pointed out that in many ways the student revolutionaries had won the battle. Buildings were no longer in flames, guns were no longer brandished, but that was because on the central intellectual and moral issues the universities had capitulated. It was no longer a case of activists holding teachers and administrators hostage: now teachers and administrators held their students hostage—hostage to the emancipationist pabulum of their cherished 1960s ideology. Radical feminism, multiculturalism, political correctness: some of the names are new, but the phenomena were born and bred in the Sixties. "When the dust had settled," Bloom wrote near the end of *The Closing of the American Mind*, "it could be seen that the very distinction between educated and uneducated in America had been leveled, that even the pitiful remnant of it expressed in the opposition between highbrow and lowbrow had been annihilated. . . . Freedom had been restricted in the most effective way—by the impoverishment of alternatives."

The Closing of the American Mind was an exhilarating draught for anyone concerned about the fate of intellectual life in the American univeristy. Its extraordinary success sparked numerous other reconsiderations of American academia, some of which aroused considerable public interest. But the counter-attack by the cultural Left, after a slow start, has been brutal and unremitting. And the sad truth is, things are much worse in the academy today than they were in 1987. The destruction of standards and the proliferation of radical ideologies is far more advanced and institutionalized now than it was then, and any effort to criticize the status quo is instantly met by a combination of ridicule and contempt.

It should be pointed out, however, that in some ways Bloom was an unwitting controversialist. For notwithstanding its polemical passages and topical concerns, *The Closing of the American Mind* is in its deepest sense a spiritual autobiography. It is the record of one man's efforts to think through the great tradition and consider anew Plato's perennial question: What is the good life for man? It was one of Allan Bloom's greatest strengths to understand that this question can never be answered definitively and that it is never dispensible. It made him a philosopher. It also, even more than his unfashionable opinions about education, rock music, and cultural relativism, was what earned him the undying enmity of the complacent and the superficial. At his trial, Socrates described himself as the gadfly of Athens, ceaselessly settling "here, there, and everywhere, rousing, persuading, reproving." The sting of a gadfly is painful. But Bloom's many enemies should not be too quick to rejoice at his departure. As Socrates reminded the jury, they "will not easily find another."

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Reflections on Matisse

by Hilton Kramer

Sometimes it has been conceded that I have a certain technical ability but that all the same my ambition is limited, and does not go beyond the purely visual satisfaction such as can be obtained from looking at a picture. But the thought of a painter must not be considered as separate from his pictorial means, for the thought is worth no more than its expression by the means, which must be more complete (and by complete I do not mean complicated) the deeper is his thought. I am unable to distinguish between the feeling I have about life and my way of translating it.
—Henri Matisse, in "Notes of a Painter" (1908)

Matisse first emerged as a leader of the School of Paris in the fall of 1905. That was the year the critic Louis Vauxcelles, who admired the thirty-six-year-old painter even if he did not understand him, coined the term *fauves*--"wild beasts"—to describe the work of Matisse and his followers in the Salon d'Automne. However ironical or absurd this coinage may now seem to us as a description of Matisse's pictorial aesthetic, at the time it had the effect of conferring on his work the status of an avant-garde provocation.

The evidence suggests that this had never been Matisse's intention. The role of *peintre maudit* was not something he coveted. He had submitted his art to the lessons of the masters. He was forging a style based on the discoveries of Pissarro, Seurat, and Cézanne. Nothing about his experience or his temperament placed him in the line of those *révolté* personalities who specialized in uproar and anarchy. Yet in the fast-paced world of the Paris avant-garde, where radical innovation was a cynosure of distinction and reputations were made overnight by coterie opinion while the public remained largely oblivious to what was really happening in art, Matisse was thrust into a position wholly alien to his sensibility. For a couple of years thereafter, until Picasso, twelve years his junior, emerged with *Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon* in 1907 to challenge his rival's leadership of the avant-garde, every negative opinion, whether academic or "advanced," only added to Matisse's pre-eminence.

After the impact of *Les Desmoiselles*, however, Matisse was never again mistaken for an avant-garde incendiary. With the bizarre painting that appalled and electrified the cognoscenti, which understood that *Les Desmoiselles* was at once a response to Matisse's *Le Bonheur de vivre* (1905-6) and an assault upon the tradition from which it derived, Picasso effectively appropriated the role of avant-garde "wild beast"—a role that, as far as public opinion was concerned, he was never to relinquish.

Le Bonheur de vivre, owing to its long sequestration in the collection of the Barnes Foundation, which never permitted its reproduction in color, is the least familiar of modern masterpieces. Yet this painting was Matisse's own response to the hostility his work had met with in the Salon d'Automne of 1905, a response that entrenched his art even more deeply in the aesthetic principles

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which had governed the Fauvist paintings that had caused such a furor and that did so on a far grander scale, too. Had it been better known, its role both in Matisse's development and in Picasso's, too, would have been more readily understood, and it is a great pity that it could not be secured for the marvelous Matisse retrospective that John Elderfield has now organized at the Museum of Modern Art.[1] For it is a painting that stands at the crossroads of modern art. No sooner was this masterwork completed, elevating Matisse's art to a new level of achievement, than it was eclipsed—in avant-garde opinion, anyway—by Picasso's bombshell, and this, in turn, did much to determine the way modern art was comprehended from that day until ours.

Whereas Matisse had drawn upon a long tradition of European painting—from Giorgione, Poussin, and Watteau to Ingres, Cézanne, and Gauguin—to create a modern version of a pastoral paradise in *Le Bonheur de vivre*, Picasso had turned to the alien traditions of primitive art to create in *Les Desmoiselles* a nether world of strange gods and violent emotion. As between the mythological nymphs of *Le Bonheur de vivre* and the grotesque effigies of *Les Desmoiselles*, there was no question as to which was the more shocking or more intended to be shocking. Picasso had unleashed a vein of feeling that was to have immense consequences for the art and culture of the modern era while Matisse's ambition came to seem, as he said in his "Notes of a Painter," more "limited"—limited, that is, to the realm of aesthetic pleasure. There was thus opened up, in the very first decade of the century and in the work of its two greatest artists, the chasm that has continued to divide the art of the modern era down to our own time.

There can be little doubt, I think, that what might be called Matisse's "tradition," by which I mean not only Matisse's own accomplishment but his influence on other artists and the whole spirit of his aesthetic, has been less widely understood than that of Picasso, whose art and life have dominated so much of our thinking about art in this century. The fact that we have had to wait twelve years, since the great Picasso retrospective that was mounted at MOMA in 1980, for a comparable retrospective devoted to Matisse is only another reminder of this basic difference in our apprehension and valuation of their respective accomplishments.

Matisse seems to have understood the implications of the chasm that separated him from Picasso straightaway, and in the immediate aftermath of *Les Desmoiselles*, as the juggernaut of Cubism was launched upon the Paris art scene, he wrote his great defense of his artistic philosophy in the "Notes of a Painter," which was first published in *La Grande Revue* on December 25, 1908. Owing to a single, long sentence in this manifesto, however, Matisse seemed to incriminate himself as some kind of escapist, at least in the minds of the more *révolté* elements of the avant-garde, and as a result this beautiful avowal of his faith in pure painting made him the target of further hostility for many years to come. Certainly nothing could have made his distance from the spirit of *Les Desmoiselles* more vivid than the famous passage in which Matisse wrote:

> What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker [*travailleur cérébral*], for the businessman [*l'homme d'affaires*] as well as the man of letters [*l'artiste des lettres*], for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.

Yet what immediately precedes this passage in the "Notes of a Painter" is an observation about Giotto that is as essential to Matisse's aesthetic credo as his talk of balance, purity, and serenity.

1 "Henri Matisse: A Retrospective," organized by John Elderfield with the assistance of Beatrice Kernan, remains on view at the Museum of Modern Art through January 12, 1993.

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> A work of art must carry within itself [Matisse wrote] its complete significance and impose that upon the beholder before he recognizes the subject matter. When I see the Giotto frescoes at Padua I do not trouble myself to recognize which scene of the life of Christ I have before me, but I immediately understand the sentiment which emerges from it, for it is in the lines, the composition, the color. The title will only serve to confirm my impression.

Which is why, of course, so large a part of "Notes of a Painter" is devoted to lines, composition, and especially color—to the "means" by which an artist expresses his "thought"—not only in Matisse's own work but in that of a great many other painters as well.

In his reaffirmation of this philosophy of art, Matisse made a definitive statement about his own artistic goals—goals that it must have seemed to him were imperiled by *Les Desmoiselles* and the response it instantly ignited. But he also enunciated one of the categorical statements of faith in modernist aesthetics—that belief in the power of "the purely visual satisfaction" of a painting to convey its meaning and spiritual value. This is the belief, whether consciously acknowledged or not, that draws us to the great works of the past even when the stories they retell are no longer of compelling interest to us, and it is what still draws us to many modern works—even, I daresay, *Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon*—long after their subjects have lost their power to excite our attention.

Matisse never abandoned this faith in what he called the painter's "thought." He restated it nearly thirty years later in the remarks he published in *The Studio* magazine under the title "On Modernism and Tradition" (1935). "A great modern attainment is to have found the secret of expression by color, to which has been added, with what is called Fauvism and the movements which have followed it, expression by design; contour, lines and their direction," he wrote, adding that "if I am not mistaken, only plastic form has a true value, and I have always believed that a large part of the beauty of a picture arises from the struggle which an artist wages with his limited medium."

Among "the movements" that Matisse had in mind in this statement, Cubism was undoubtedly the most important, and despite his initial recoil from *Les Desmoiselles*, he monitored the progress of Cubism with close attention to its great contribution to the "plastic form" he valued above all else in painting. He made ample use of it, too, which the current retrospective documents in greater detail than any other Matisse exhibition we have seen. Matisse was never a dogmatist in aesthetic matters. He was open to every possibility except the abandonment of the painter's "thought" to something outside of the "means" used to express it.

It is one of the many strengths of the retrospective that John Elderfield has organized at MOMA that it has been conceived and executed with a very clear and subtle understanding of the arguments and counter-arguments that have dogged Matisse's reputation since that fateful day in 1907 or thereabouts when he was effectively supplanted by Picasso as the leader of the Paris avant-garde. These, as Mr. Elderfield knows very well, are arguments and counter-arguments about the nature of art itself, and not only about Matisse's and Picasso's. Yet the fate of Matisse's reputation, and thus of our understanding of what Matisse achieved as an artist, remains ineluctably joined to the ways in which Picasso has come to define the idea of modern art in this century, and it is Mr. Elderfield's distinction in this exhibition and in the great catalogue he has written to accompany it to have explored this relationship more thoughtfully than any of his many predecessors. The result of this critical endeavor is the best account of Matisse's art and thought that any writer has given us.[2]

That the "Evaluation of Matisse's importance is still tied to evaluation of Picasso's"

2 *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective*, by John Elderfield, with contributions by Beatrice Kernan and Judith Cousins; The Museum of Modern Art/Harry N. Abrams, 480 pages, $75; $37.50 paper.

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is indeed the *donnée* of Mr. Elderfield's approach to his subject, and in the series of oppositions he cites—between the hedonist and the radical, between the artist "on holiday" and the artist "at war," between the champion of "harmony" and the exponent of "dissonance," etc., which in the end come down to an opposition between the artist as "French bourgeois" and the artist as "international bohemian"—he places Matisse's art in the historical framework that we can all instantly recognize as having dominated all discussion of these artists for as long as we can remember. No other writer has explored the implications of these facile oppositions so tellingly or related them so directly to the fact that, as Mr. Elderfield writes, "the very idea we have of modernism contains, if not indeed comprises, the idea of a protracted struggle for dominance between opposing systems, represented by Matisse and Picasso, each claiming for itself proprietary rights on an essential modernism."

Mr. Elderfield also gives us a very exact account of the reason why Matisse later emerged as the winner, so to speak, in the contest that he seemed for so long to have forfeited.

> Matisse's reputation as a radical artist was not to achieve its full height . . . until after his death [he writes]. It came as the result not only of broadening critical acknowledgment of his work . . . it also, and more importantly, was the result of Matisse's influence on new art. His paintings of the 1930s and 1940s had been perceived as maintaining the vitality and innovative possibilities of that art in a period of great stylistic confusion, when the tradition of Picasso's Cubism decayed into mannerism and mediocrity. His example had certainly been critical to the development of American Abstract Expressionist painting in that way. But it was not until the 1960s, when so-called Color Field painters, Minimalists, and Pop artists could all, in their different ways, find inspiration in Matisse's work, that he fully recaptured the interest of the avant-garde, was acknowledged as a true radical, and again began to be described as the most important twentieth-century painter.

To which Mr. Elderfield promptly adds the questions that continue to haunt both the debate about Matisse and Picasso and the larger debate about art itself:

> But still, was not Picasso, perhaps, a more "serious" artist? And is he not a more influential one? For some, the old questions remain, especially now that the magnificent *Alterstil* of modernism itself—the American painting of the 1950s and 1960s that came so to value the purely visual, and therefore Matisse—is past.

This retrospective is undoubtedly the finest exhibition of its kind ever mounted, and insofar as it is possible to do justice to an artist of Matisse's stature in a single exhibition, this one certainly succeeds beyond cavil. And quite apart from what it does for Matisse, it also has the effect of making one feel a lot better about the century in which we live—a terrible century in so many ways, yet one in which we can nonetheless feel an immense sense of pride if, beside its unremitting record of suffering, bloodshed, and tragedy, it can also boast of an achievement as sublime as Matisse's. Yet there is something about this wonderful event that induces a feeling of sadness and loss as well—a feeling that one of the great possibilities of the human mind may now have spent itself. When we exit this exhibition and return to the sordid cultural landscape of this last decade of the century, it is hard to believe that we shall ever again witness anything like it, now or in the foreseeable future.

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The great Edmund Burke

by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.

The publication of *The Great Melody* is an event not just in the small circle of Edmund Burke scholarship but also in the larger community of historians.[1] Still more, and above all, it is a gift to anyone who wants to understand politics. Conor Cruise O'Brien, the all-around Irish journalist, critic, lecturer, politician, and scholar, has produced a "thematic biography" of Burke the statesman that is worthy of its great subject. O'Brien would wish for no higher praise, and he deserves it first of all because he has made it possible. With his book he has restored Burke's reputation for our time and thus enabled us to see, despite the denigration of historians, just what sort of biography might be adequate to Burke.

O'Brien turns his back on Burke the political philosopher. That Burke has enjoyed the attention and patronage of American conservatives since the late Forties. Their writings are dismissed somewhat unfairly by O'Brien on the slender authority of a single quotation doubting Burke's desire, as opposed to his need, to construct a theory. We hear nothing on the vexed question of Burke and the natural law; so all those who are dying for the truth on this point will have to go elsewhere. In an appendix O'Brien does offer an exchange between the political theorist Sir Isaiah Berlin and himself as to whether Burke was a reactionary, but that too turns out to be a caution, though in a sense also a treat, for theorists. While presenting in his letters a dim replication of Charles James Fox's illusions about the French Revolution, Sir Isaiah sketches a vivid, comic caricature of himself as a theorist who uses his erudition to evade an issue.

O'Brien does not suffer from this fault, and not because he lacks the means for it. Instead of political philosophy he offers the "great melody" of Burke's political actions on America, Ireland, France, and India. The phrase comes from two lines of Yeats on Burke, which O'Brien accepts and expounds as insight into historical truth rather than as a concept to play with. Burke's occupation in those fields of policy is taken seriously and treated in its own terms, not as a mine from which to dig pretty nuggets of theory. The theory in Burke is left where it is, in the context where one finds it. The context is not the company of theorists in Burke's time but the political purpose Burke was pursuing and simultaneously explaining in golden words. The Great Melody is neither mere theory nor mere rhetoric; it is the explanation of noble deeds that, in explaining them, elevates them. We might believe, for example, as to British attitudes toward the American colonies, that the policy of conciliation with the American colonists urged by Burke on the party of his patron Lord Rockingham derived from nothing more than the dovish

1 *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography and Commented Anthology of Edmund Burke*, by Conor Cruise O'Brien; University of Chicago Press, 692 pages, $34.95.

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queasiness over use of compulsion familiar in our day. But with Burke's *Speech on Conciliation with America* (1775) we see with O'Brien's instruction that the policy made sense, that its wishes were not forlorn and were in fact connected to permanent truths. That connection is not above politics (like an imaginary best city), but it is above *ordinary* politics—the kind of politics we have without men like Burke, or when such men are forgotten.

In practice, O'Brien's Great Melody is very close to the Whig interpretation of history, the nineteenth-century view of Macaulay, above all others, which O'Brien finds more persuasive than anything that has been proposed in this century to replace it. Twentieth-century British historiography has been dominated by Sir Lewis Namier, for whom all politics is ordinary, all motives are tawdry, all politicians are petty. He and his followers are O'Brien's opponents, deaf to the Great Melody, and he goes after them with the justice and alacrity of an executioner who believes in his work. The text and footnotes of *The Great Melody* are littered with the bodies of dead Namierites, some of them carved up, others neatly dispatched with a single shot between the eyes, still others repeatedly pummeled and left for dead. Quasi-Namierites receive a thrashing proportional to their complicity in the Namierite crime of reductionism. (Reductionism is mean-spiritedness disguised, often from the reductionist himself, as scientific objectivity.) The master, Sir Lewis himself, is disposed of in O'Brien's long introduction on "Burke and Some Scholars," but his corpse is later set on its feet again to serve O'Brien's exemplary severity, lest his point not get through to the historians. For though Namier has had his critics—A. J. P. Taylor rightly accused him of "taking the mind out of history"—this is the first adequate treatment of him on his home ground. Perhaps Namier will not have had his full deserts until he receives similar punishment from a "professional historian" (which O'Brien is not, and to keep himself clear of contamination he frequently relies on the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*), for that is the title Namier claimed for himself. But when that happens, the professional will have to take his cue from the amateur, who took his from Burke.

O'Brien prefers to say that Namier took the *fantasia* out of history, by which he means the imaginative use of probable inference from the evidence, necessarily partial, to work out the whole. The procedure presupposes that contemporaries knew what they were doing—some, of course, more than others—and it looks among the variety of intents for the leading possibilities so as to circumscribe the field of choice; then it finds and judges the dominant choice, partly in its own terms, partly for its foreseeable consequences. O'Brien does not make up a method of *fantasia*, just as he does not conceptualize his Great Melody for universal application, composing short ditties perhaps, for lesser figures such as Namier's favorite, Henry Wilson Legge. But O'Brien's view of practice is practically useful, because it looks at things as a practitioner does, more dispassionately but sympathetically and under the same discipline of having to decide on limited information. Above all, it is open to greatness. The Namierite historian seeks out the representative figure, as someone he can handle; and when he happens upon Burke, he throws him out of consideration for endangering the scientific sample. The Namierite excludes all but the humdrum; for him, but only for him, history is cosily predictable. Working from the wrong end of the telescope, he thinks himself in Lilliput while actually visiting Brobdingnag. O'Brien sets himself against the "Namierization" of the eighteenth century, as he calls it, and begins the task of De-Namierization with his demonstration of the greatness of Burke.

Namier had the nerve to call Burke a lackey, and casually too, as if he didn't care. The truth in this falsehood (for Namier cared very much) is that, although Burke was the greatest statesman of his age (in O'Brien's opinion), he was never in command, nor did he ever put himself forward in order to rise, preferring instead to exercise his influence on

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Rockingham, Fox, Pitt, Fitzwilliam, even George III, and thus to work through these more prominent but less prudent figures. O'Brien makes the case that Burke's influence was very great in a number of instances in which he has been misunderstood, belittled, or unobserved by others, and that he was so far from being a lackey as to have inspired, formulated, and promoted policies that were adopted, and to have engineered, not merely proposed, lasting constitutional reforms. Examples are: on America, the decision to repeal the Stamp Act and George III's decision to end the American war (O'Brien calls the period of British policy toward America from 1778 to 1782 a battle of wills between Burke and George III); on Ireland, the Catholic Relief Act of 1793 and the disaster of the Irish rebellion in 1798; on India, Fox's East India Bill in 1783, establishing the principle of accountability in the proceedings against Warren Hastings; on France, a vindication of Burke's insight as responsible for his prophetic vision, and of Burke's side of his split with Fox, the creation of the Portland Whigs, the contest with Pitt over the "Regicide" peace, which was finally won by Burke. And much else; and all connected in a whole. Very few books accomplish as much as this one or leave so marked a satisfaction in the reader for the way shown, the truth found, and the justice done.

Nonetheless, one might raise three points with the author. First, he remarks on Burke's characterization of the French Revolution as one based for the first time "upon a theory." It is clear, then, that theory can have a disastrously harmful effect on political practice. But can bad theory of this kind—what Burke called *armed doctrine*— be counteracted without an opposing theory? The pathetic illusions and sentimental susceptibilities of the Foxite Whigs, which continue in their successors to this very day, suggest the need for counter-revolutionary doctrine. (Burke, by the way, proudly accepted the status and name of counter-revolutionary.) Here is the opening for a theory of "conservatism," the theory that hates theory, born and bred in paradox and embarrassment.

Second, in the four themes of the Great Melody—Ireland, America, India, and France—we note the absence of *Britain*. Perhaps this is because Burke's concern for the British constitution seems to be greater than a fifth theme; it unites the four themes, each of which was undertaken by Burke not only for itself but also with a view to reform at home. O'Brien himself reminds us that Burke was both witness and founder of the Whig interpretation of history, which is an interpretation of the British constitution. He shows how Burke helped to constitutionalize the British monarchy by exposing the system of the "King's friends," explaining the worth of parties, rejecting the theory of electoral mandate, and working toward the creation of the office of prime minister. But perhaps O'Brien's apparent understatement is due to his conviction that Burke was always essentially Irish, that there was a "buried Irish layer" in his soul that gave him direction and reminded him that his true home was not Britain. Burke's father had probably conformed to Protestantism for the sake of his career, a resort not uncommon where legal and social disabilities attached to being Catholic; and Burke himself left Ireland for the literary and political life in London.

Was Burke therefore driven by guilt over his Irish descent? The question leads to a third consideration. Guilt and shame are a theme of O'Brien's treatment, not only of Burke but also of his rivals, friends, and allies. Undoubtedly it is a plausible accounting, since much more political, or simply human, behavior is due to guilt or shame than the systems of self-interest can explain. Nor is it unreasonable to feel shame for one's faults and omissions. But shame is not a virtue, and one wonders, after reading O'Brien's convincing and triumphant vindication, what it was that Burke had to be ashamed about, given the *circumstances* of his time (that is, the inevitable irrationalities), on which Burke himself and O'Brien rightly lay such stress for determining the morality of actions. On a couple of occasions when explaining the fury of Burke's attack on Hastings, O'Brien, by resorting to guilt, seems to

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step over the boundary between morality and moralism.

Possibly the difficulty is more general, however, and O'Brien's resort to guilt is defensible. In today's blather over seeking one's "identity," the assumption is made that one can live in good conscience according to one's ethnic roots. If even Burke could not live without guilt, perhaps this is not so. The prudent statesman, exercising every virtue in reasonable proportion, is as such shameless, and deserves to be; but in the complication of events and the necessities of compromise can he act for the common good without ever betraying the people of his home? And what is betrayed? In free countries you betray someone merely by disappointing him: ask any loser of an election. It is hard to say that Burke betrayed the people of Ireland (or of India) when he did all he could for them that was compatible with the good, or the opinion, of the people of Britain. It was only through Britain, as O'Brien agrees, that any good could be done. The particularity of the common good seems to put statesmen—any statesmen, not just those from minorities—in a dilemma between their home and their virtue, resulting in guilt. And to repeat, Burke, in O'Brien's glowing account, does not have much to be ashamed of.

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Fish-eating, whiskey, death & rebirth

by Christopher Carduff

"Well, Mr. Flood, we have not met like this
In a long time; and many a change has come
To both of us, I fear, since last it was
We had a drop together. Welcome home!"
—Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Mr. Flood's Party"

McSorley's is still there, just off Cooper Square at 15 East Seventh Street, and it's still a wonderful saloon. It sold its first pint in 1854—gold-painted words in the front window say "This Is Our 138th Year And Ale Is Well"—making it the oldest place to drink in New York City. In 1940, when Joseph Mitchell, who had then only recently joined *The New Yorker*, wrote his famous Profile of McSorley's, the saloon was a youthful eighty-six. In the half-century since, it has changed very little: it now draws its ale in small glass seidels rather than earthenware mugs; the pair of flickering gas lamps over the bar has given way to two steady-burning electric bulbs; and, since August 10, 1970, when the order to do so came down from City Hall, it has—albeit at first only grudgingly—admitted women. ("Good ale, raw onions, and no ladies" was once the motto of McSorley's, but now, especially during weekends, co-eds from NYU fairly overrun the place.) In all other essentials, however, it remains, by design of a succession of faithful owners, much the same establishment that the Irish immigrant Old John McSorley founded and ran, and that Joseph Mitchell once so vividly wrote about. "There is no cash register," Mitchell reported. "Coins are dropped in soup bowls . . . and bills are kept in a rosewood cashbox." "The chairs are rickety; when a fat man is sitting in one, it squeaks like new shoes every time he takes a breath." "It is possible to relax in McSorley's. For one thing, it is dark and gloomy, and repose comes easy in a gloomy place. . . . Also, there is a thick, musty smell that acts as a balm to jerky nerves; it is really a rich compound of the smells of pine sawdust, tap drippings, pipe tobacco, coal smoke, and onions. A Bellevue interne once said that for many mental states the smell in McSorley's would be a lot more beneficial than psychoanalysis or sedative pills or prayer."

At any hour of the day, the crowd at McSorley's is made up of college students, working- and businessmen from the Village and environs, and a scattering of solitary old ale-drinkers. These people come to the saloon because the food and drink are good and cheap, and because it's in their neighborhood. Most nights, however, there is also at least one customer who has come a long distance to drink at McSorley's. He's never been in the saloon before, yet in some ways he knows it better than most of the regulars. This customer plies the staff with questions about the history of the place, and is more interested in the mementos displayed behind the bar, and the countless documents, photographs, and newspaper clippings framed and screwed to the walls, than he is in his ale. He's read Brendan Behan or Christopher Morley or some travel guide on McSorley's,

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or he's seen John Sloan's paintings of it or perhaps the recent public-television documentary about it. He knows something about McSorley's place in the city's social and cultural history, and that McSorley's itself, committed as it is to never changing, is a lively living museum of Old New York.

Most likely, though, this customer has come to McSorley's because he's read his Joseph Mitchell. On some nights he's an old man who long ago read that *New Yorker* Profile, perhaps in the magazine, perhaps as reprinted as the title piece of Mitchell's best-selling book *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*. On other nights he's a young journalist, some former idolator of Tom Wolfe's on whom an elder colleague once pressed a dog-eared copy of *McSorley's* with the command, "Read The Master." Whoever he is, he's a man on a mission, an amateur historian in search of a vanished corner of Manhattan, the beat once worked by the best reporter ever to write for *The New Yorker*. The landmarks on that beat, with the single exception of this ancient wooden ale house, are gone now, most of them for decades. Among Mitchell's other haunts—all rendered indelibly in some forty-five Profiles, Reporter at Large pieces, and fictional sketches published between the early 1930s and the mid-1960s—were certain of the city's once-countless speakeasies, dime movie theaters, quarter-a-night fleabags, and burlesque halls. More important still were the great, unspoiled fishhouses on Fulton and Water streets—Libby's and Sweet's and Sloppy Louie's—where, at least until the mid-1940s, you could bring "a fish, or an eel, or a crab, or the wing of a skate, or whatever look[ed] best to you that day at the Fulton Fish Market," and have it cooked to perfection by an old Italian who knew exactly what to do with it. Libby's is now a memory of only the oldest workers on the waterfront, and Sweet's and Sloppy Louie's, like the Fish Market itself, have been gutted and parsleyed over as part of the South Street Seaport, that hideously cute theme-mall in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge.

The staff at McSorley's have had it easy in recent years; they've been distracted from their work less and less often as the querying Mitchell readers, once so numerous, have grown fewer and fewer. The decline in Mitchell's readership has been largely Mitchell's own fault: in 1964, for reasons known only to himself, he ceased publishing in *The New Yorker*, and shortly thereafter, as if to guarantee a state of total obscurity, he began to reject every publisher's offer to keep his works in print. The result is that Mitchell's name has lately been known only to a few readers, and this despite the occasional praise heaped upon him by his colleagues. (Brendan Gill called Mitchell "the finest writer on *The New Yorker*," Calvin Trillin called him the "reporter who set the standard," and William Maxwell, going them one better, called him simply "the best writer in America.")

Now, quite suddenly, all this has begun to change. Mitchell is again a current author—and, to his and his publisher's surprise, a best-selling one—and McSorley's has again become a kind a literary tourist attraction. This past August, with little pre-publication fanfare, Pantheon brought out an immense selected works, *Up in the Old Hotel*,[1] which gathers together Mitchell's four mature collections—*McSorley's* (1943), *Old Mr. Flood* (1948), *The Bottom of the Harbor* (1960), and *Joe Gould's Secret* (1965)—and seven previously uncollected stories. There is also, for an introduction, a two-thousand-word Author's Note, the first new piece of writing to appear above Mitchell's signature in some twenty-eight years. In it Mitchell makes no reference to his long years of silence, nor does he say why he's chosen this moment to return his work to print; both, for the time being, remain mysteries. What Mitchell does do, more explicitly here than anywhere before, is talk about what in his stories "typifies" his "cast of mind"—in other words, he turns over his carpet and traces the figure in it. The figure is that of a laughing skull, of the kind so often found in the engravings of Posada, a Mexican artist

1 *Up in the Old Hotel & Other Stories*, by Joseph Mitchell; Pantheon, 718 pages, $27.50.

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whose work, in Mitchell words, is alive "with animated skeletons mimicking living human beings engaged in many kinds of human activities, mimicking them and mocking them." What gives Mitchell's pieces their unity, quite beyond their Manhattan subject matter, is a kind of graveyard humor—call it "The Bird is on the Wing" humor, the humor expressed in a drinking song sung loudly by one of Mitchell's Fish Market denizens:

> Come, let us drink while we have breath,
> For there's no drinking after death
> And he that will his health deny
> Down among the dead men
> Let him lie!

It is the humor of the blue young man who, in one Mitchell story, frequents a disused Staten Island graveyard because the riot of live vines obscuring the tombstones there acts as a tonic on him. It is the humor of Mazie, the ticket-lady at the Venice Theatre, who is the friend of every bum on the Bowery and so with all the ambulance drivers in that sorry part of the city: "Police say she summons more ambulances than any other private citizen in town," Mitchell writes, "and she is proud of this." And it is the humor of the "steadies" at McSorley's, the oldest of the old ale-drinkers, who, to ward off thoughts of their own demise, remember the dead with irreverent stories, and who understand the sentiments of the fellow-regular who, on the day of his retirement, pulled his chair close to the barroom's centerpiece cast-iron stove and said, "If my savings hold out, I'll never draw another sober breath."

Joseph Mitchell, who turned eighty-four last July, still reports almost daily to his *New Yorker* office. Hired on by Harold Ross in 1938, he has weathered a half-century of changes at the magazine, and, from the sound of recent quotes to the press, seems determined to survive even the sea-change wrought by Tina Brown. Mitchell isn't saying so, but perhaps the sudden publication of *Up in the Old Hotel* is to be understood as yet another expression of his graveyard sense of humor, a sort of raspberry blown in the face of Change—and of the Reaper.

Mitchell was born in 1908 on a cotton and tobacco farm near Fairmont, North Carolina. His father and his brothers were farmers, cotton buyers, and tobacco warehousers; his ancestors were English, Scottish, and Scotch-Irish farming people who settled in southeastern North Carolina before the Revolutionary War. Mitchell owns a farm in Robeson County and spends more and more of each passing year there; one hears that its proceeds have, for most of his life, allowed him the leisure to do and to write as he pleases.

Mitchell studied for four years at the University of North Carolina, where he reported for the college paper and began to write strange, lyrical short stories about the region he'd grown up in. One of these stories, "Cool Swamp and Field Woman," appeared in *The New American Caravan* of 1929; another, "The Brewers," in *The American Caravan IV* of 1931. These early efforts are wholly unlike his later work in both tone and subject matter, and they reveal the young Mitchell as a student of the moderns, earnestly appropriating the themes and techniques of Lawrence, Faulkner, and especially Joyce. They are the kind of stories in which men drink corn liquor and thump watermelons and yearn for women "with clean strength like a colt"; they are made up largely of such unconsciously parodic sentences as "He would watch space decay and he would think of time dissolving like thick cigaret smoke when a breath is blown into it and through it." Mitchell soon abandoned such purple language. He also dropped North Carolina as a locale for his writings, except in a series of Tarheel tall tales, memoirs in the form of "stretchers," published in *The New Yorker* in 1939-40 and reprinted in *McSorley's*. These three stories, set in a mythical Black Ankle County where the men teach the boys "how to bait a hook for blue and red-breast bream, how to use a shotgun, how to tell the age of a mule by examining his teeth, [and]

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how to dress partridges for the skillet," are squarely in that tradition of American small-town humor which has its source in Mark Twain and now runs through the monologues of Garrison Keillor—the tradition, that is, of the cracker-barrel tale full of exaggerated characters, precise local detail, and cunningly camouflaged moral purpose.

In the spring of 1929, Mitchell left college without a degree. That summer he wrote a report on the tobacco market in Fairmont and sold it to the Sunday magazine of the New York *Herald Tribune*. This, together with his reading of James Bryce's *American Commonwealth*, encouraged him to come to New York and work as a newspaperman—ultimately, he hoped, as a political reporter. He cubbed for a few months on Pulitzer's foundering *World* (which would soon be bought out by the afternoon *Telegram*), then, in 1930-31, worked as a "district man" at night for *The Herald Tribune*. He covered Brooklyn, the West Side, and Harlem. "I liked Harlem best," he wrote in the prefatory essay to his first book, a collection of newspaper features called *My Ears Are Bent* (1938):

> Until I came to New York City I had never lived in a town with a population of more than 2,699, and I was alternately delighted and frightened out of my wits by what I saw at night in Harlem. I would go off duty at 3 A.M., and then I would walk around the streets and look, discovering what the depression and the prurience of white men were doing to a people who are "last to be hired, first to be fired." When I got tired of looking, usually around daybreak, I would get on the subway and go to my $9 a week furnished room in Greenwich Village. When I got out of the subway at Sheridan Square I would get a *Herald Tribune* to see what the rewrite man had done with the stories I had telephoned in hours earlier. I had a police card in my pocket and I was twenty-one years old and everything was new to me. By the time the Harlem trick was over I was so fascinated by the melodrama of the metropolis at night that I forgot my ambition to become a political reporter.

While working in Harlem, Mitchell frequented its speakeasies, nightclubs, and gambling dens and took a special interest in their proprietors and regulars. "I got to know a few underworld figures," he wrote, "and I used to like to listen to them talk." *The Herald Tribune*, unfortunately, wasn't much interested in what he heard. It was not until 1931, when Mitchell joined *The World-Telegram*, that he was allowed to concentrate on the sorts of stories that interested him most—interviews, especially with what Harold Ross would later term "low life." Over the next seven years, Mitchell would crank out scores of brief features, few numbering over fifteen hundred words, based on the banter of saloonkeepers, panhandlers, and scab taxidrivers; fire-and-brimstone revivalists and marrying-parlor priests; a great many naked or near-naked ladies (fan-dancers, bubble-dancers, nudists, strippers, and shimmy-shakers); and various suppliers of dead bats and powdered roots to the conjure doctors of Harlem. These people could *talk*—they were fountains of artless, unpremeditated monologue, full of incident and character and uncommon knowledge—and they provided welcome relief from Mitchell's main job of work, interviewing celebrities. "The least interesting people to interview," Mitchell wrote during these years, "are the ones who probably should be the most interesting, industrial leaders, automobile manufacturers, Wall Street financiers . . . people like that," either because their speech is canned—they don't so much talk as spew forth their own publicity—or because they are so reticent as to appear truly stupid. Only slightly less boring, according to Mitchell, are society women, "distinguished authors," explorers, and actresses under the age of thirty-five. "After painfully interviewing one of those [people], you go down the elevator and walk into the street and see the pretty girls, the pretty working girls, with their jolly breasts bouncing about under their dresses and you are relieved; you feel as if you had escaped from a tomb in which the worms were just beginning their work."

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It was during his first year at *The World-Telegram* that Mitchell met a fellow-staffer as new to reporting, as passionate about literature, and as fascinated with raffishness as he was: A. J. Liebling. The two became instant friends, and, as Raymond Sokolov writes in *Wayward Reporter*, his 1980 biography of Liebling, they "talked and drank and ranted at each other for the next thirty years"—that is, until Liebling's death, in 1963. They were more to each other than just convivial lunch partners: they were mutual literary influences, the shapers of each other's talents. Together, through their talk and work, they defined the aesthetics of "New York Low Life," a literary genre all their own.

Not that they pretended to be without literary ancestors. They both saw themselves as but the latest in a long line of artist-journalists, writers who, finding the conventions of the novel, the drama, or the narrative poem uncongenial to their subject matter and story-telling talents, adopt instead the conventions of another and "lower" narrative form, the newspaper or magazine article. In English, Mitchell and Liebling agreed, their line began with Defoe and his 1722 *Journal of the Plague Year*, an account of the Black Death in London circa 1664-65 that, if not completely factual, is solidly based on facts and is certainly "true." The line continued through the Fielding of *Jonathan Wild* and the Sterne of *A Sentimental Journey* and on through such more purely journalistic writers as William Cobbett, Pierce Egan, and George Borrow. Among Americans, Mitchell and Liebling prized the example of Mark Twain, especially the Twain of the sketches and travel books and *Life on the Mississippi*. Liebling adored the fiction-cum-reporting of Stephen Crane.

As Sokolov notes, at the beginning of their time at *The World-Telegram*, "Mitchell's and Liebling's professional interests coincided so completely that they found themselves writing about some of the same people"—and, one might add, in much the same manner, that of the humorous local-color sketch. Mitchell's first book, *My Ears Are Bent*, and Liebling's, *Back Where I Came From* (both 1938), collect the best of their brief *World-Telegram* pieces and, in places, seem the work of a single writer. By the mid-Thirties, however, when *The New Yorker* began to accept their proposals for longer articles, these two writers, so different in temperament and personal background, had started to develop their own "specialties." Liebling, a native New Yorker and the son of a self-made fur wholesaler, took to painting florid portraits of self-made petty businessmen—and the pettier the business, the better. He wrote about struggling fight promoters, cigar-store owners, "tummlers," "jongleurs," "guys what knows to get a dollar." He found his ideal subject in what he termed "The Telephone Booth Indian," the small-potatoes bookmaker or talent agent who, too poor or too cheap or too wily to pay rent on a permanent office, conducts his business—incoming calls only—from pay phones in lobbies of Midtown office buildings. On the other hand, Mitchell, who grew up among the give-and-take of the Carolina tobacco markets, gravitated toward more social settings: the fish market, the saloons, the isolated black neighborhoods on the far side of Staten Island. He discovered he was less interested in depicting colorful, idiosyncratic "types" than in detailing the history and folkways of complex, densely populated communities. According to Sokolov, "Mitchell now thinks his personal involvement with his subjects was greater than Liebling's, whose concern for poor people grew more out of a sense of economic injustice." (Mitchell also told Sokolov that Liebling "had read Engels on the working class of Manchester and had been influenced by him as a reporter.") In other words, Mitchell was interested in people, and Liebling, at bottom, in The People.

By the time both writers had published their second books—Liebling his *Telephone Booth Indian* in 1942, Mitchell his *McSorley's* the following year—each had an office at *The New Yorker* and, like Thurber and White, were spoken of by readers in the same breath. They still are. But by then their collaboration on "Low Life" had already ended:

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in 1939, Ross broke up the Mitchell-Liebling team when he sent Liebling to France to cover World War II. After his return to New York in 1945, Liebling struck out for new territory: he reinvented *The New Yorker*'s Wayward Press department, added Boxing journalism to the magazine's mix, did a tour of duty as Ross's Chicago correspondent, and, among so much else, wrote the classic travel book *Normandy Revisited* and his memoirs as a glutton in France. He did not return to "Low Life" until the early Fifties, in his numerous essays about his "favorite writer," Colonel John R. Stingo, the racetrack reporter for the seedy *New York Enquirer*. In contrast, Mitchell stayed at home in the Village, traveled extensively only in the Fish Market, and worked and reworked his "Low Life" material with ever more exacting craft and to ever greater literary effect.

Mitchell's first signed piece for *The New Yorker* appeared in November 1933. Between then and the publication of *McSorley's* ten years later, he produced the bulk of his work, thirty-four pieces, most of which make up the first half of *Up in the Old Hotel*. Over the next twenty years he would publish only twelve more items, half of them appearing between 1944 and early 1947. "One thing I can't understand about myself," Mitchell recently told a reporter for *The New York Times*, "is that on rewrite at *The World-Telegram* I was very fast. But when I got to *The New Yorker*, it took longer and longer." Yet surely it is one thing to be, as Mitchell was at *The World-Telegram*, a just-hatched reporter with a craft to learn and reputation to earn, and quite another to be, as Mitchell was in 1943, a fifteen-year veteran with a subject to exploit, a style to perfect, and a uniquely patient and deep-pocketed magazine behind you. But, one suspects, it was not only the sinecure of a *New Yorker* staff job that slowed Mitchell down; it was also the success of *McSorley's* and the screws Mitchell put to himself to top it. The book quickly went through several printings and several editions and occasioned raves on both sides of the Atlantic: Malcolm Cowley put Mitchell right up there with Dickens, and A. A. Milne and John Betjeman were unsparing with their praise. His sudden reputation as a reporter, Mitchell recently told the *Times*, became an albatross around his neck.

McSorley's, like *My Ears Are Bent*, is unabashedly a miscellany, a catchall for the best of Mitchell's work through 1942. The Black Ankle sketches are here, and so are a couple of fictional vignettes, but chief among *McSorley's* contents are a dozen "Low Life" pieces, including Profiles of Lady Olga, a bearded lady in a traveling circus, and of Commodore Dutch, "a brassy little man who has made a living for the last forty years by giving an annual ball for the benefit of himself." There is also a piece about Cockeye Jimmy Nikanov, "the king of the pickpockets," a Russian Gypsy given to explaining himself in the following terms: "To a gypsy feller, there ain't but two kinds of merchandise. Lost and unlost. Anything that ain't nailed down is lost." These and the rest of the best of the pieces in *McSorley's* take Mitchell the reporter, the gatherer and shaper of facts and talk, about as far as his chosen material could take him. In the wake of the book's success, Mitchell, it seems, was confronted with a choice: to go on and write another dozen such humorous character sketches and so turn out yet another such miscellany, or to somehow, without abandoning his hard-won audience and subject matter, take the art of "New York Low Life" somewhere beyond mere tour-de-force reporting.

But where? The first stop, it turned out, was fiction. Between January 1944 and August 1945, Mitchell published three linked sketches which, after much revision, would be shaped into his third book, *Old Mr. Flood*. These "stories of fish-eating, whiskey, death, and rebirth" are Mitchell's definitive tribute to the world of Fulton Fish Market: its stalls, restaurants, hotels, and barrooms, its invigorating reek, its remarkable bounty. Here, as in their journalistic predecessors, Mitchell is the narrator, and is present less in person than as disembodied eye and ear; indeed, on the surface these stories read like a three-part factual Profile of yet another of Mitchell's in-

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spired eccentrics, this time Mr. Hugh Griffin Flood, a nonagenerian ex-house-wrecking contractor and the honorary "Mayor of the Fish Market." But it soon becomes clear that these stories are about more than the ancient lore of fishmongers and fish-eaters and the crotchets of one old man. They are about, above all else, how to live the right life.

Old Mr. Flood, Mitchell explains, is not based on any one person; "combined in him are aspects of several old men who work or hang out in Fulton Fish Market, or who did in the past." He is two times a widower, and lives alone in a room at the Hartford House, "the oldest hotel in continuous operation in the city"; he is well-to-do "and could undoubtedly afford the Waldorf-Astoria, but newness depresses him." He was born on Staten Island in 1850, and when we are introduced to him he is ninety-three years old.

> Many aged people reconcile themselves to the certainty of death and become tranquil [Mitchell writes]; Mr. Flood is unreconcilable. There are three reasons for this. First, he deeply enjoys living. Second, he comes of a long line of Baptists and has a nagging fear of the hereafter, complicated by the fact that the descriptions of heaven in the Bible are as forbidding to him as those of hell. "I don't really want to go to either one of those places," he says. He broods about religion and reads a chapter of the Bible practically every day. Even so, he goes to church only on Easter. On that day he has several drinks of Scotch for breakfast and then gets in a cab and goes to a Baptist church in Chelsea. For at least a week thereafter he is gloomy and silent. "I'm a God-fearing man," he says, "and I believe in Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and coming again, but one sermon a year is all I can stand." Third, he is a diet theorist—he calls himself a seafoodetarian—and feels obliged to reach a spectacular age in order to prove his theory. He is convinced that the eating of meat and vegetables shortens life and he maintains that the only sensible food for man, particularly for a man who wants to hit a hundred and fifteen, is fish.

Mr. Flood may be no churchgoer, but he's a finer Christian than most any of my acquaintance. He gives praise to God daily, not by sitting in an ill-lit pew for half an hour but by rising at five, dressing in clean if old-fashioned clothes, and making a comprehensive tour of the Fish Market, breathing in its smells and stopping to admire His creation at every stall. He is a Saint Francis to the gulls, feeding them all and tending specially to the one-legged specimens, one or two of which will take scraps from his hands. He remembers Christ not with bread and wine at the Communion rail, but with oysters and whiskey at the Hartford House bar. Still, like every good Christian, his mind is a turmoil of regrets. "It's not what I did I regret," Mr. Flood confesses to a friend, a fishing-boat chandler named Tom Maggiani:

> "[I]t's what I didn't do. Except for the bottle, I always walked the straight and narrow; a family man, a good provider, never cut up, never did ugly, and I regret it. In the summer of 1902 I came real close to getting in serious trouble with a married woman, but I had a fight with my conscience and my conscience won, and what's the result? I had two wives, good, Christian women, and I can't hardly remember what either of them looked like, but I can remember the face on that woman so clear it hurts, and there's never a day passes I don't curse myself. 'What kind of a timid, dried-up, weevily fellow were you?' I say to myself. 'You should've said to hell with what's right and what's wrong, the devil take the hindmost. You'd have something to remember, you'd be happier now.' She's out in Woodlawn, six feet under, and she's been there twenty-two years, God rest her, and here I am, just an old, old man with nothing left but a belly and a brain and a dollar or two."
>
> "Life is sad," said Mr. Maggiani.

The name Mr. Flood comes from a Tilbury Town poem by Edwin Arlington Robinson, the one about the whiskey-soaked old man who, alone beneath the harvest moon, conducts a nostalgic dialogue with himself ("Well, Mr. Flood, . . . The bird is on the wing . . . Drink to the bird"; "Well, Mr. Flood,/ Since you propose it, I believe I

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will"). And, in a sense, that is what *Old Mr. Flood* is for Mitchell, a dialogue between himself at thirty-five and his alter ego, the man he might have been had he been born not in 1908 but some sixty years earlier, or the man he hopes to be in his own old age. Mitchell gives Mr. Flood his own birthday, July 27. He gives him all his own gustatory predilections. He gives him his own love for the Bible, and Twain, and Heywood Broun, columnist for *The World-Telegram* and friend to the underdog. And he gives him a love of all things old, especially those things that speak of Old New York. Mr. Flood keeps on his mantelpiece "three small cast-iron statues—a bare-knuckle pug with his fists cocked, a running horse with its mane streaming, and an American Eagle"—which came off the fire escapes of the old *Police Gazette* building. "He once wrote the Museum of the City of New York suggesting that the owners of the *Gazette* building be asked to donate the fire-escape ornaments to the Museum. 'Suppose this bldg. is torn down,' he wrote. 'All that beautiful iron work will disappear into scrap. If the owners do not see fit to donate, I am a retired housewrecker and I could go there in the dead of night with a monkey-wrench and use my own discretion.'" Mitchell is a founding Friend of Cast-Iron Architecture and for many years was one of the Commissioners of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Tim Costello, proprietor of a Third Avenue bar made famous not by Mitchell but by a somewhat later "Low Life" writer, John McNulty, knew Mitchell well. Perhaps thinking of Old Mr. Flood, Costello once said to Brendan Gill, who was collecting material for his book *Here at The New Yorker*: "Joe has been workin' hard at bein' an old man since he was in short pants. It's as good an ambition as any, since barrin' a bus in your path or an angry husband or, in Joe's case, the side of a buildin' tumblin' in on you, you can't help but succeed. He's a great one, Joe is, for pawin' over other people's fallin'-down properties. If he ever disappears, start lookin' for him under fifty foot of brick, with a rusty fire escape on his chest and a pleased smile on his face. 'Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,' my grandmother said, 'we're all born, but we're not all buried!'"

After publishing the stories in *Old Mr. Flood*, Mitchell returned to reporting, and to some of the same subjects he'd written about previously. Mitchell's later pieces, however, are in no way mere rehashes of past successes. In them, he goes well beyond what he had already achieved as a reporter by posing new and exacting formal demands on his talent, challenges that only the most serious and accomplished literary artist could rise to. The chief challenge was to find a way to invest the factual reporting he'd perfected in *McSorley's* with the thematic resonance he'd brought to the Mr. Flood stories—in other words, to write strictly journalistic pieces that, without abandoning the conventions of reporting, also explore classic literary themes. That Mitchell found a successful way to do this, to write a handful of unique non-fiction pieces that in their literary interest can hold their own beside the best American short stories, is a remarkable achievement. These late pieces, together with the best of Mitchell's earlier work, will earn a place among our classics, and for reasons beyond Mitchell's mastery of a peculiarly American kind of vernacular humor. They will last because, to paraphrase F. R. Leavis writing in another context, they not only enlarge the possibilities of literature for its practitioners, but also enlarge in their readers an awareness of the possibilities of life.

Two of these late pieces, which now augment the *McSorley's* section of *Up in the Old Hotel*, are already among Mitchell's best known: "The Mohawks in High Steel" (1949), a study of a band of New York Indians who have no fear of heights and work as riveters on skyscrapers and bridges, which was used by Edmund Wilson as a kind of introduction to his book *Apologies to the Iroquois* (1960); and "The Beautiful Flower" (1955), lately retitled "The Gypsy Women," which was the inspiration for *Bajour*, a musical comedy about the ways of Gypsy con art-

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ists that ran 200-plus performances on Broadway in 1964-65. Six others, including "Up in the Old Hotel," concern the New York City waterfront, and were gathered together in *The Bottom of the Harbor*. But it is the last and the longest and the best of these late pieces, "Joe Gould's Secret" (1964), that I wish to discuss here. It bears close examination not only because it is the summit of Mitchell's art, but because it is also, perhaps, the key to his subsequent silence.

"Joe Gould," writes Mitchell, "was an odd and penniless and unemployable little man who came to the city in 1916 and ducked and dodged and held on as hard as he could for over thirty-five years." He called himself the last of the Greenwich Village bohemians —"All the others fell by the wayside"—and "the foremost authority in the United States on the subject of doing without." When Mitchell first saw him, in 1932, Gould was in his early forties, but looked decades older. He stood five feet four, and weighed no more than ninety pounds; he had a bushy beard, and his hair had gone perhaps a year without cutting. "In my eyes," writes Mitchell, "he was an ancient, enigmatic, spectral figure, a banished man. I never saw him without thinking of the Ancient Mariner or of the Wandering Jew or of the Flying Dutchman." Mitchell also never saw him without inquiring into the progress of his work, for Gould was a fellow-writer, the Harvard-educated author of what was reputedly the longest unpublished work in existence, "An Oral History of Our Time." This great work, described by Gould as "the informal history of the shirt-sleeved multitude—what they had to say about their jobs, love affairs, vittles, sprees, scrapes, and sorrows"—was the fruit of over twenty thousand conversations with almost as many down-and-outers. In it, writes Mitchell, "are the hopelessly incoherent biographies of hundreds of bums, . . . grisly descriptions of hospital and clinic experiences, . . . summaries of innumerable Union Square and Columbus Circle harangues, and the addled opinions of scores of park-bench oracles and gin-mill savants." "What people say is history," said Gould. "In time to come . . . people may read Gould's Oral History to see what went wrong with us, the way we read Gibbon's 'Decline and Fall' to see what went wrong with the Romans."

One morning in the summer of 1942, Mitchell approached his editor at *The New Yorker* about the possibility of writing a Profile of Gould. Mitchell remembers telling him that "I thought Gould was a perfect example of a type widespread in New York City, the solitary nocturnal wanderer, and that that was the aspect of him that interested me most, that and his Oral History." Soon as word was out that Mitchell was looking for him, Gould phoned *The New Yorker* to set up a meeting. When Mitchell met him the following morning at a Village diner, Gould drew himself up on his counter stool and said: "I understand you want to write something about me, and I greet you at the beginning of a great endeavor."

And indeed the endeavor *was* great. Mitchell sat for weeks upon weeks of interview sessions with Gould, some of them lasting eight and ten hours. He bought Gould many breakfasts, which Gould would prolong with countless cups of coffee and by emptying a bottle of ketchup on his plate and then eating it with a spoon. Gould told Mitchell about his place within a most distinguished New England family ("the Goulds were the Goulds when the Cabots and Lowells were clamdiggers") and about how, by disobeying his father's wish that he become a doctor, he lost that place forever. He told Mitchell about his coming to New York to write novels, plays, poems, songs, and essays, and about how he had settled instead for a job as an assistant crime reporter on the *Evening Mail*. He told how, by listening closely to the gulls, they at last "got through" to him, and how he learned to speak their language and even translate English poetry into it. ("Henry Wadsworth Longfellow translates perfectly into sea gull," Gould said.) But most of all he bragged to Mitchell about his Oral History and of the sheer self-sacrificing heroism involved in writing it. He bragged about how snippets of the book had been

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published in some of the most distinguished little magazines of the era, including Ezra Pound's *The Exile*, Malcolm Cowley's *Broom*, and Marianne Moore's *The Dial*, and he gave Mitchell his own tattered copies of these magazines to prove it. Mitchell was unimpressed by Gould's writing, which, like his conversation, "was a little stiff and stilted and mostly rather dull, but enlivened now and then by a surprising observation or bit of information or by sarcasm or malice or nonsense." Yet a couple of sentences in one of the essays had a haunting effect on him. "In the years to come," Mitchell writes, "they would return to my mind a great many times. They appeared at the end of a paragraph in which [Gould] had made the point that he was dubious about the possibility of dividing people into sane and insane. 'I would judge the sanest man to be him who most firmly realizes the tragic isolation of humanity and pursues his essential purposes calmly,' he wrote. 'I suppose I feel about it in this way because I have a delusion of grandeur. I believe myself to be Joe Gould.'"

Mitchell's Profile of Gould, "Professor Sea Gull," was published in *The New Yorker* in December 1942, and was reprinted the following year in *McSorley's*. It instantly made Joe Gould a living Village tourist attraction. Letters and dollar bills meant for Gould began turning up in Mitchell's mail, and Gould, responding to this mail, began to use *The New Yorker* as his postal address. Soon Gould was turning up at Mitchell's office daily, inquiring after his mail and staying on to talk—and talk, and talk, and talk. When, weeks into Gould's new routine, Mitchell at last complained, Gould said something that brought him up short. "Look," he said. "You're the one who started all this. I didn't seek you out. You sought me out. You wanted to write about me, and you did, and you'll have to take the consequences."

Mitchell took the consequences for much of the next fifteen years, until Gould's death, at the age of sixty-eight, from arteriosclerosis and senility. But along the way, in an effort to get Gould off his back by finding him an editor for the Oral History, Mitchell stumbled onto Joe Gould's secret: the Oral History did not exist. Except for the handful of essays written for the little magazines and then rewritten, over and over, in dozens of dime-store composition books, Gould had produced nothing. He had taken in Mitchell, and he had taken in his friends—indeed, as Mitchell later realized, he had taken in even himself. For if Gould couldn't produce a great book, whether because of laziness or lack of talent or an unproductive perfectionism, he could at least convince well-wishers that he was a person capable of doing so. He could, that is, create a great illusion by living out a great delusion, the delusion that he was "Joe Gould."

So what, one wonders, is Joe *Mitchell*'s secret? Why, after writing this last remarkable Profile, did he suddenly fall silent? No reviewer of *Up in the Old Hotel* has been able to keep himself from guessing. Most all have made the valid point that the very last vestiges of Old New York, which Mitchell sought out in the best of his pieces, are now vanished for good; nothing and no one still survives to remind New Yorkers that their city was once, before and above all else, a seaport. Another notes that during the composition of "Joe Gould's Secret," A. J. Liebling died, robbing Mitchell of his most trusted sounding board and loudest-laughing audience; as Edmund Wilson once remarked, we write for our contemporaries more than we realize until one of them dies. Still others, notably Roy Blount, Jr., have suggested that "low life," "talk," and the realities of so-called "personality reporting" have changed so radically over the last three decades as to have become impracticable. "Low life" is no longer amusingly raffish; the Commodore Dutches and Telephone Booth Indians have devolved into abject beggars and crack-cocaine dealers. "Talk" now consists of psychobabble, sociobabble, anthro-ethno-gender babble, and what people said on television last night. And real "personality reporting," the kind that comes with quotes, is lately practiced only with the fear of a defamation suit hanging over the reporter.

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Yet one suspects Blount got still closer to the truth when he wrote: "I don't think it is being fanciful to suppose that [Joe] Gould wore Mitchell out." I think that Gould hardened Mitchell's heart against his type—the crank, the yo-yo, the member of "the shirt-sleeved multitude"—and that, in doing so, he soured Mitchell's appetite for "Low Life" material for good. Suddenly, writing about such people as Gould became morally problematic. It became not only about making striking, darkly humorous portraits of society's outcasts but also about "taking the consequences" of becoming part of these outcasts' lives. It became, in Gould's pointed words, not only about "lying down with dogs" but also about "getting up with fleas."

The Joe Gould of "Professor Sea Gull" is of a piece with Mitchell's other "Low Life" characters; he makes us gawk and laugh and cross ourselves and say, "There but for the grace of God go I." The Gould of "Joe Gould's Secret" is something else entirely, something more complex and, alone among Mitchell's characters, something frightening. This Joe Gould is no mere tragicomic bohemian, he is Mitchell's nightmare vision of himself: he's the over-educated, over-reaching, seized-up artist-journalist as Madman. In this final Profile, Mitchell's graveyard humor yields to horror as the distance between reporter and subject closes. We feel a terrible pity for Joe Gould, but also something like it for Joe Mitchell, who, in his dealings with Gould, loses much of his youthful innocence, not to mention his gift for unqualified compassion, both of which are essential to his work as a chronicler of have-nots.

The Mitchell who narrates "Joe Gould's Secret" puts one in mind of Hawthorne's Ethan Brand, a man with a *literally* hardened heart, a heart that "had ceased to partake of the universal throb." Perhaps Mitchell felt that by writing about such men as Gould, he too "had lost his hold on the magnetic chain of humanity." Brand, writes Hawthorne, was, at the end, "no longer a brother man, opening the chambers or the dungeons of our common nature by the key of holy sympathy, which gave him a right to share in all its secrets; he was now a cold observer, looking on mankind as the subject of his experiment." I don't think it is being too romantic to suppose that something like this is at the bottom of Mitchell's silence, and that it is just this sort of morbid state of mind that he refers to when, according to a reporter for *The New York Times*, "he says that in part a personal sorrow that he does not care to discuss took away his zest for the kind of humorous subjects that had been his staple."

One hears that Mitchell has never stopped writing, that he is hard at work on another book. Sometimes it is said to be a memoir of his dual life in New York and North Carolina. Sometimes it said to be a further study of the Old Fulton Fish Market. The Sunday *Times Book Review* lately reported that Mitchell is writing what he describes as "a complicated biography of a woman about town." Perhaps Mitchell has been at work on all three projects. Perhaps soon we will be treated to a series of new books, and the release of *Up in the Old Hotel* is merely Mitchell's canny way of setting the stage for them. But I doubt it. Mitchell recently said something to a reporter that makes me wonder whether all these works-in-progress are as mythical as the Oral History itself. He told *The New York Times* that the impulse behind his bringing out his omnibus was at least in part the hope that, "if I could get [my previously published work] in a book together, I could put it all behind me. Maybe it will free me to find my way to the right door."

Yet surely it is being greedy to hope for more from Mitchell, whose collected work to date, presented by Pantheon in a handsome one-volume edition, exhibits, in its entirety, an organic shapeliness, a comic originality, and an artistic integrity unique in contemporary American prose. *Up in the Old Hotel* is the *real* Oral History of Our Time, the great book Joe Gould wished he could have written. What people say *is* history—Gould was right about that—and history, when recorded by Mitchell, is literature. One hopes that his book will stay in print forever, bending the ear with great American talk for as long as there are readers who can listen.

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Affirmative-action "Bartlett's"

by John Simon

In America, people are just as likely to look up a word in *Webster's* as in a dictionary; a synonym in *Roget's* as in a thesaurus; and a quotation, nearly always, in *Bartlett's*. Which is why a new edition of that indispensable tool, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, is likely to be greeted with almost the same excited curiosity as the latest fashions from Paris or the new line of VCRs from Japan. Lately, there has been a new *Bartlett's* every dozen years or so, and the sixteenth, which has just come out, has been especially eagerly awaited because the new editor, Justin Kaplan, is a bit of a literary lion in his own right.[1]

A Harvard product, Kaplan has won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for his biography of Mark Twain, and the American Book Award for his Whitman biography. He has also written books on Lincoln Steffens and others, and he is married to the novelist Anne Bernays. All of this makes him rather more of a celebrity than the editor of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Editions, Emily Morison Beck, whose chief claim to fame was being the daughter of the noted historian Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison, or Anonymous, the editor of the Thirteenth Edition, who doesn't even get his or her name anywhere on or in the book. Mrs. Beck did get her name on the title page under that of John Bartlett in characters one quarter the size of his; Justin Kaplan, better than that, makes it onto the title page, cover, and jacket, both front and spine, in block characters of the same hefty size as John's, and what with the title General Editor prominent under his name, Justin manages to loom larger than John.

Moreover, in various interviews in the papers, Kaplan has generously expatiated about the changes he was making: lopping off deadwood, adding a battery of new names, making the whole thing more up-to-the-minute as well as politically correct, what with quotations from "nontraditional sources," and, in general, getting *Bartlett's* to lighten up. "I happen to think," he says, "it was time for *Bartlett's* to be a little less heavy." So in goes stuff from television, movies, sports, politics, pop and rock music, advertising, and street talk. Emily Morison Beck greeted Kaplan's appointment by telling the new editor on the phone, "Whatever you do, don't have a collaborator. To do the job right, you have to rely on personal taste." He clearly heeded the admiral's daughter's advice, and just as Sam Morison renavigated the journey of the Admiral of the Ocean Seas, Kaplan set out to discover familiar quotations in uncharted waters of his own. It is only fitting that on the quingenary (or quincentenary) of Columbus's colonizing expedition, Kaplan should annex for us the quotations of Mad Ave and Harlem's mean

1 *Familiar Quotations: A Collection of Passages, Phrases & Proverbs Traced to Their Sources in Ancient & Modern Literature*, by John Bartlett. Sixteenth Edition. Justin Kaplan, General Editor. Little, Brown, 1,405 pages, $40.

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streets, of the Doors and Muhammad Ali —not forgetting Mick Jagger, who can't get no satisfaction, and Erica Jong, who can't find that zipless fuck. Ice-T and his "Cop Killer" will, presumably, be unwrapped in the Seventeenth Edition.

What exactly is a dictionary of quotations; what should it be, and what, realistically, can it be? Back in 1855, John Bartlett, who worked himself up from bookstore clerk to bookstore owner in Cambridge, Massachusetts, knew exactly what he was about when he published in samizdat his commonplace book of 258 pages, comprising quotations mostly from Shakespeare, the Bible, and British writers, with a few from New England and New York thrown in. His idea was "to show . . . the obligations our language owes to various authors for numerous phrases and familiar quotations which have become 'household words.'" In a literary world bounded (or triangulated) by London, Jerusalem, and Boston, it was not impossible to achieve some sort of consensus on which oft-been-thought-but-ne'er-so-well-express'd phrases should be included in a handy little enchiridion. But that was a manual for a still manual and individualistic age; what kind of a *Bartlett's* is required in an era of computer literacy and every other kind of, highly conformist, illiteracy?

Significantly, few of the newer quotations in the Sixteenth come from literature, or even from books of any kind. And if from a book, the quotation is as like as not the mere title of that tome. Do we really believe that Alex Comfort's sole contribution, "The Joy of Sex," identified as "*Title of book* [*1972*]," is a familiar quotation? And is "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," identified as "*Title of musical comedy* [*1962*]," by Larry Gelbart and Burt Shevelove, truly a quotation? Is even "The Making of a Counter Culture," labeled "*Title of book* [*1969*]," a quotation? Do people go around saying, "Well, that's the making of a counter culture for you"? And does the equally adept interlocutor interject, "Yes, indeed, a funny thing happened on the way to the Forum"?

But never fear, literature—even poetry—is not dead. Not while you can aptly quote from Carl Perkins (1932-), "You can do anything, / But don't step on my blue suede shoes." Or as long as, if your neighbors' pet is noisy, you can dress the cur down with that familiar quotation from Jerry Leiber (1933-) and Mike Stoler (ditto), "You ain't nothin' but a hound dog cryin' all the time./ Well, you ain't never caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend of mine." If despite this admonition, the mutt keeps baying at the moon, and you complain that loss of sleep is making you ill, the clever neighbors (thanks to owning Kaplan's florid florilegium) riposte with, "Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship." This from *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), which goes on, "Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick," as posited by Susan Sontag (1933-), a former double agent spying for both kingdoms, but now "The Spy Who Came In from the Cold," labeled "*Title of novel* [*1963*]," by John Le Carré (1931-). We learn from Kaplan's compilation that Le Carré is really David John Moore Cornwell, just as Malcolm X (1925-1965) is really El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, and Toni Morrison (1931-), Chloe Anthony Wofford, one of whose winged words included in the new *Bartlett's* is, "At no point in my life have I ever felt as though I were an American."

If anyone were to question Toni-Chloe's right to assert this, she could hurl back at him "Sisterhood Is Powerful, *Title of book* [*1970*]" by Robin Morgan. Or she could pick "*Title of song* [*1968*]" from James Brown: "I'm Black and I'm Proud." But Kaplan's chrestomathy is distinctly subjective. If someone quotes at you from it Annie Dillard's "I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck," and, dimly recalling that Noël Coward had something to say on that very same thing, you scurry to the Coward rubric, you will not find what you're looking for: "Certain women should be struck regularly, like gongs." The British being less politically correct than we are, you will find it in *The Ox-*

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ford Dictionary of Modern Quotations, edited by Tony Augarde (hereinafter "Augarde"), and in *The New Penguin Dictionary of Quotations*, edited by J. M. and M. J. Cohen (hereinafter "Cohen").

But as you look at the available quotations from Coward, your eye is caught by "Learn the lines and don't bump into the furniture." It is identified as "*Attributed. Advice on acting.*" Hold on, you say, and rush to your trusty old Fifteenth and 125th Anniversary Edition of *Bartlett's*, and there, strike me dead, you find under the heading Spencer Tracy: "Just know your lines and don't bump into the furniture." It is identified as "*Advice on acting*," with nary an "attributed" to dilute its authority. So whom do you trust? Mrs. Beck or Mr. Kaplan? Was it Spencer Tracy (1900-1967) or Noël Coward (1899-1973) who advised or attributedly advised in this valuable fashion? [2] And was it "Just know your lines" or "Learn your lines"? There is no footnote from Justin to justify that just-out. Yet you'd think that a chap so proud of his dictionary's four thousand footnotes could have spared one to elucidate this troubling discrepancy. But, of course, Kaplan uses his footnote space very selectively, e.g., footnote 9 on page 782, which glosses "No woman can be too rich or too thin," identified as "*Saying*," [3] with "Tell a female she's thin and she's yours for life," a weaker version, but having the advantage of coming from a novel by Anne Bernays (1930-), in private life Mrs. Justin Kaplan.

Comparative Bartletologists can have lots of similar scholarly fun. Take that truly familiar quotation that I'm sure Mr. Kaplan hurled at Mrs. Beck (unless she hurled it at him first), "What we've got here is a failure to communicate," labeled in both editions "*Cool Hand Luke* (*screenplay*) [*1967*]." But whereas Mrs. Beck assigns this to Donn Pearce (1928-), Mr. Kaplan allocates it to Frank R. Pierson (1925-). A little research revealed to me that *Cool Hand Luke*, the screenplay, was a collaboration between Pearce and Pierson, based on the former's novel. So what happened? Why would Kaplan rob Pearce to pay Pierson? Did he have one of his factotums read the novel, only to discover that the line was not in the book, and so conclude it must have been an addition of Pierson's? Yet couldn't, during one of those sodden and smoky Hollywood collaborations, when the co-authors found themselves at loggerheads, Pierson have yelled at Pearce, "What we have here, Donn, is a failure to communicate"? Whereupon Pearce screamed back, "Stuff it up your script, Frank," and he—they—did. Then why not assign the quotation to both of them jointly? Well, Frank Pierson was in my class at Harvard, though I never met him, but Justin, our near-coeval, may have.

Consider, however, to what lengths of scholarship Kaplan will go on other occasions. Thus the distinguished Mark Twain scholar proclaims in his preface that he has "restored to its rightful author, the American humorist Bill Nye, 'Wagner's music is better than it sounds,' an observation previously credited to Mark Twain." Well now, even such an undistinguished Mark Twain scholar as I am can turn to Augarde and establish that "The late Bill Nye once said, 'I have been told that Wagner's music is better than it sounds.'": The source? "Mark Twain *Autobiography* [1924], vol. 1, p. 338." A much better *mot* on the same subject comes from Beachcomber (the pen name of the British humorist J. B. Morton): "Wagner was the Puccini of music," but this one is in no dictionary I know of.

Of course, I appreciate the difficulties in tracking down the sources of such ephemera, however familiar they may be. John Bartlett

2 I bet on Coward, for three reasons. Tracy was the strong, silent type who would not have gone in for such disquisitions on acting technique. Besides, it was Coward who told an American Method actor he was directing, "Don't just do something, stand there!" That kindred precept, by the way, is not in any dictionary known to me. Finally, Cohen has the disputed quotation, too, as attributed to Coward.

3 Kaplan does footnote this with "Frequently attributed to the DUCHESS OF WINDSOR and others." Cohen has it as "One can never be too thin or too rich," attributed to the Duchess, but not to "others."

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had a much easier time of it. When he quoted something, the source was engraved in rock. For example, with "Suffer the little children to come unto me . . ." he knew exactly that he was quoting Saint Matthew, not Mark or Luke or John or Woody Allen. Or, for that matter, John Lennon (1940-1980), who is quoted by Kaplan: "We're more popular than Jesus now. . . ." To be sure John (Lennon, that is) was merely echoing a similar utterance of Charlie Chaplin's: "I am known in parts of the world by people who have never heard of Jesus Christ." Even so, one wonders what makes either one of these quotations worthy of inclusion?

This brings us up against the fundamental question again: How *does* one put together a dictionary of quotations? What makes any utterance worthy of enshrinement? Take Harold Pinter, a newcomer in the Sixteenth; of the four quotations from him, two are to be found in Augarde. Could "familiar" mean merely "included in a previous dictionary"? Surely not.

Or is it, in our computer age, the saying that can be traced, with proper attribution, to X number of appearances in the public prints? Even assuming that such checks were made, what would they prove? That journalists, a loud but limited band, preconize this quotation. Kaplan is doubtless too sophisticated, and sure of his own opinions, to be so other-directed.[4] Look how ruthlessly he dumped Liv Ullmann, one of Mrs. Beck's quotees, even though one of her dictums, "The best thing that can come with success is the knowledge that it is nothing to long for," is widely applicable, and might be taken to heart even by Mr. Kaplan. But Miss Ullmann's P.C. credentials are nowhere near so good as those of Alice Walker, who is included by Kaplan with several *pensées*, among them the poignant, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." (Although, I think, it pisses Him or Her off even more if you walk by *The Color Purple* in some bookstore without noticing it.)

In most cases, I suspect, you put into your dictionary what pleases *you*. As Kaplan declared to an article writer for the *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, "experience taught me to follow my own impulses." Or, as he puts it more elegantly in his preface, "This edition includes a number of quotations that could not be described as 'familiar' but, one might argue, *deserve* to be 'familiar' . . ." *Magister dixit*. Thus he followed his impulse to include Norman Mailer (1923-), whom Mrs. Beck must have scorned, for he is not in the Fifteenth. Mr. Kaplan is bigger than that: he will include even a quotation from Joseph Campbell that he characterizes in said article as "that revolting expression."

But now what does he pick from Mailer? Not such titles (and concepts) as "The White Negro" or "The Time of Her Time," not anything about the metaphysical notion of "cancer" that Norman once popularized, or something from *The Prisoner of Sex* that challenges the feminists. Among Kaplan's four quotations, one is something Mailer himself treats as frivolous (from *The Armies of the Night*): "In the air the Pentagon would then, went the presumption, turn orange and vibrate until all evil emissions had fled this levitation. At that point the war in Vietnam would end." Also this, from the 1973 *Marilyn*: ". . . She was our angel, the sweet angel of sex, and the sugar of sex came up from her like a resonance of sound in the clearest grain of a violin." That could make you turn orange and vibrate, but the only place you'd want to include it is a dictionary of wildly mixed metaphors.

And further, from *The Executioner's Song*, "Then the Warden said, 'Do you have anything you'd like to say?' And Gary looked up at the ceiling and hesitated, then said, 'Let's do it.' That was it." Now, which part of this passage would be the actual nub, one of those quotations (to quote the often quotable Kaplan himself) "We use . . . as passwords and secret handshakes, socially strategic signals that say, 'I understand you. We speak the same language'"? Obviously no one would want to regurgitate the whole

4 See David Riesman (1909-), a Kaplan quotee.

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thing. Could the crux be "Do you have anything you'd like to say?" It is a question that, in the somewhat shorter form, "Do you have anything to say?" Mailer himself must often have heard put to him, but not, for all that, especially quotable. It can hardly be the bit about Gary Gilmore looking at the ceiling and hesitating. Then is it Gary's own "Let's do it"? Well, suppose you are at a cocktail party surrounded by fellow Mailerians, all deliberating whether to tackle a particularly awesome-looking hors d'oeuvre, and you turn to them and say, "Let's do it"? Would they, despite having, in all likelihood, read *The Executioner's Song* more than once, realize that you were quoting Gilmore, i.e., Mailer? Or would they just think (wrongly) that what crossed your lips was a perfectly mundane—anybody's—"Let's do it"? A puzzlement. Unless the really quotable essence is that final "That was it." Yet that too, alas, could be mistaken for a mere non-Mailerian platitude, instead of being recognized as a Mailerian one.

One thing salient about the Sixteenth is Kaplan's decimation of the modern poets. In the Fifteenth, in 1980, Richard Wilbur rated thirty entries; in 1992, only twelve. Robert Lowell is down to thirty-seven from forty-eight. James Dickey to six from eleven. John Ashbery, who published reams of poetry in the last twelve years, is nevertheless down from six to four, though his vogue continues unabated. William Merwin is down to nine from twenty-four. James Merrill's eight has been halved. Going back a bit, John Crowe Ransom has decreased from six to five; E. E. Cummings is down to twenty-seven from thirty-eight; Louis MacNeice bisected from two to one quotation, the jettisoned no less quotable than the retained.

This tends to corroborate that Kaplan is indulging his predilections with signal courage and absurdity. And when he has no predilections, he follows those of Mrs. Beck and the Fifteenth. Take Robert Graves, a poet and prosaist of supreme importance and quotability (in my lay, nonanthologist opinion). He gets only four entries from Mrs. Beck, and Mr. Kaplan, as so often, merely reprints those. Yet Augarde, more appreciative (or more British), grants Graves eight appearances, and Cohen clocks in with fifteen. In the 1962 edition of *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations*, the Cohens allowed him only nine; but they have evidently been looking and listening—and thinking—since then, hence the boost. Kaplan sticks with his inheritance; for him, Graves must not be a big part of "intellectual history and cultural montage," as he defines a "quotation book."

But if Graves doesn't grow for Kaplan, Adrienne Rich increases from eight to nine; Sylvia Plath is up one to twelve, and Derek Walcott's stock, most dramatically, leaps from two to five. And this despite the fact that he was not yet a Nobel laureate. Could this be mere political correctness (women, blacks), or is it a matter of profound conviction: whereas other poets are trimmed, these are beefed up. Or is it simply a matter of facts and figures, e.g., during the last twelve years in drawing rooms, common rooms, and bars frequented by Kaplan, Derek Walcott has been quoted, say, seventeen times, and John Crowe Ransom only eleven. Again, in the printed materials Kaplan and his staff have perused, Sylvia Plath figures frequently, but James Wright (a rather finer poet in my view) does not appear at all. So, not having died a much-touted suicide, and not having caught Mr. Kaplan's camera eye, Wright is excluded from the *Bartlett's* cultural montage. Yet shouldn't this, from "To a Hostess Saying Good Night," be there: "Some of the vast, the vacant stars/ Will never see your face at all,/ Your frail, your lovely eyelids fall/ Between Andromeda and Mars"? Or this, from "Mutterings over the Crib of a Deaf Child": "I will putter as though I had not heard,/ And lift him into my arms and sing/ Whether he hears my song or not." If not familiar, it *deserves* to be.

Yet if the treatment of Anglo-American material is sketchy and erratic, what about foreign languages? Here there is enough randomness for Heisenberg to have a field day. Take the case of Brecht. Both Mrs. Beck and Mr. Kaplan accord him a score of six, i.e.,

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two fewer than Adrienne Rich's, and one fewer than that of Dylan, a.k.a. Robert Zimmerman (1941-). But Kaplan does know something about Brecht, and proves that he is a hands-on editor by keeping only four of Mrs. Beck's selections, and introducing two of his. What do these changes accomplish? Mrs. Beck offered, "Mackie's back in town," which, granted, is small potatoes. Kaplan has something better: "Grub first: then ethics." He assigns this to Act II, Scene 1, even though it's really in Scene 3, and gives as his apparent source the Marc Blitzstein translation, which, however, reads: "First feed the face and then talk right and wrong." Eric Bentley and Desmond Vesey translate this as, "But till you feed us, right and wrong can wait." Ralph Mannheim and Ralph Willett offer, "Food is the first thing. Morals follow on." So where does Kaplan come up with that uneuphonious translation of "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral"? It comes, evidently, from *The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Quotations*, another effort by the Cohens, who punctuate more sensibly with a comma, "Grub first, then ethics." But where would the Cohens have gotten *their* version? Could it have been adapted from Guy Stern's translation in the booklet accompanying the CBS Masterworks recording of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, which reads, "First comes the grub, then come the morals," even though they imply that their translation came from Vesey and Bentley? What clinches the Cohens as Kaplan's source, in any case, is that they, too, misassign the quotation to Scene 1. Kaplan, clearly, hasn't done much checking. His other change replaces a good passage from a poem with an even better one from another poem; by rights, both should have been included, as well as much more that isn't.

When it comes to foreign literature, though, there is no way an essentially English-language quotation book can be up to snuff. Still, some things just ought to be there. Let me give one example: Théophile Gautier. Kaplan merely takes over the same quotation from the poem "L'Art" that Mrs. Beck deigned to include. It is by no means the only necessary passage from that poem, and, indeed, Cohen gives us another, equally fine. But Cohen also includes one of Gautier's most famous prose utterances: "I am a man for whom the outer world exists." This one eluded both Mrs. Beck and Mr. Kaplan. So it goes. (That, by the way, is from me, although *Bartlett's* attributes it to one Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1922-), who said it much later than I did, but had the good fortune of getting it into print first.)

The big problem, to be sure, is what sort of readership your "quote book" is aiming for. Kaplan, clearly, has a rather demotic one in mind. "It seems to me that in some ways musical lyrics are our street poetry," he opines. And so it is for the street poetry of Michael Jackson, Grace Slick, Bruce Springsteen, Simon and Garfunkel, and the rest that Stanley Kunitz shrinks from twenty-one entries to eight, and Aldous Huxley from five to a mere two. But who wouldn't gladly sacrifice, say, a quotation from Matthew Prior in order to accommodate something as quintessential as Sesame Street's "Me want cookie"? Sesame Street, born in 1969 and apparently still alive, is the youngest author represented in the new *Bartlett's*. The other contribution from the same source is "It's not that easy bein' green," equally fine and quotable. What could be more archetypal street poetry than the songs of Sesame Street?

Still, do we really want or need street poetry in our quotation repertoire? Will we want to drop "It's not that easy bein' green" into our conversation to prove that we are with-it? Or green? And if someone were to dazzle us with "Me want cookie," would we be vastly impoverished by not knowing the provenance of this gem in "JIM [James Maury] HENSON [1936-1990], FRANK OZ [1944-], and others," and if we assumed instead that the person quoting it was merely giving vent to natural imbecility? Personally, I think that street poetry should be left in the gutter where it was found. Those who traffic in it don't buy dictionaries of quotations, and those who do can forgo the poetry of Joni Mitchell and Janis Joplin.

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All of which is not to say that Kaplan hasn't done some good things, too. Commendably, he has pruned the entries of both his special authors, Mark Twain and Walt Whitman, whom Mrs. Beck overquoted, though, as far as I'm concerned, Whitman, that strange fruit, could have used even more pruning. But at least Kaplan removes such bizarre blunders as when our self-inflated autodidact proclaims, "Me imperturbe, standing at ease in nature." Kaplan could not, however, bring himself to shear off a more hallowed piece of illiteracy, the *camerado* in "Camerado, this is no book,/ Who touches this touches a man."

And there are times when Kaplan does improve on Mrs. Beck's choices. Thus Emily gives us two quite nice lyrical passages from Roy Campbell, both of which Kaplan drops, while including Campbell's justly famous epigram "On Some South African Novelists," which Emily was apparently unaware of. She must have been aware of Strindberg, however, but rejected him *en bloc*; Kaplan at least stretches his quotational quota system to allow for this one nugget from the great Swede: "I loathe people who keep dogs. They are cowards who haven't got the guts to bite people themselves."

The Sixteenth has a trim size half an inch wider and somewhat taller than its predecessor, and is thus thinner though not necessarily richer. The type is the same, but has, on a larger page, a more laid-back look. Yet if Kaplan had wanted to make himself really useful, he would have switched the order of authors quoted from the chronological to the alphabetic, which is the customary and more sensible one. The *Bartlett's* folk, I guess, assume that people will read their book consecutively so as to get a sense of the continuous flow of thought, feeling, and expression through the ages, which strikes me as nonsense. Often we want to know what Oscar Wilde or Evelyn Waugh may have said about something (an ordering by topics might, therefore, be defensible), but with *Bartlett's* we must first hunt for the author's name in the index up front, then go chasing after the quotation somewhere else.

Quotation books, like all anthologies, have to leave you slightly dissatisfied, as all enterprises based on compromise must. Still, as I sit down with a book of this kind, I think of some quotations, or some authors, worthy of inclusion, and look for them in the book. In the present case, I came up with Max Reger's famous answer to a critic, "I'm sitting in the smallest room of my house. I have your review before me. In a moment it will be behind me." Not in the new *Bartlett's*. How about Büchner's tormented Woyzeck exclaiming, "Man is an abyss. I get dizzy when I look down." Not in *Bartlett's*. I try Belloc's immortal "On a Great Name": "I heard to-day Godolphin say/ He never gave himself away./ Come, come, Godolphin, scion of kings,/ Be generous in little things." Not there. I try Saroyan: "No foundation. All the way down the line," or "I don't suppose you ever fell in love with a midget weighing 39 pounds?" Neither of them is there. How about John Peale Bishop (1892-1944), who wrote some of America's finest love (and other) lyrics? Surely *something*? Not a bit of it: two other Bishops are there, but not J. P. And what about at least the title of that wonderful Flannery O'Connor story "Good Country People"? Nope.

This is not a good state of affairs, I say to myself. Maybe Mrs. Beck gave Kaplan a bum steer, and selection by committee would have been better than personal taste. Standing ill at ease with the new *Bartlett's*, me perturbe.

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The faithless Malraux

by Mark Falcoff

Though France has been in relative decline as a great power since 1939—some would say, since 1914—its cultural influence has survived to a remarkable degree the loss of colonies, markets, and what was once the largest fleet in the world. Even today, when the French language is deeply embattled in its former strongholds in Latin America and Asia, French civilization remains throughout the world the only pole of attraction capable of rivaling that of the United States. This situation has assured French writers an international constituency, subsidized the French book trade, and provided much useful overseas employment for cultural bureaucrats. But, more important, it has nourished the persistent illusion—in Buenos Aires or Beirut, Tunis or Tanarive, New York or Iowa City—that the outcome of disputes in literary Paris would ultimately resolve some of the more important ideological and aesthetic questions of our age.

If that proposition seems wildly overstated today, that is only because ideology—if not precisely Gallocentrism—is currently in a state of dissolution. But not so very long ago otherwise sensible, literate people in many countries expected to discover the truth about Stalin's labor camps not from the accounts of the survivors, but from a debate between Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre; or about the Moscow trials not from the findings of the Dewey Commission, but from the reflections of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Put another way, in what *other* country could a student revolt over bus fares, cafeteria food, and class sizes be regarded as a plebiscite on the future of Western capitalism? Or the personalities, major and minor, of a single urban quarter (in this case, Paris's seventh arrondissement) be so familiar to readers around the globe as to justify translation of Simone de Beauvoir's discursive, gossipy, and hugely boring memoirs into nearly a dozen languages?

The capacity of French literary politics to exercise a continuing hold on the foreign imagination is perhaps best illustrated by the enduring eminence of André Malraux, who died more than fifteen years ago. Though somewhat passé in France, Malraux continues to inspire something of an industry in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. In this country alone, over the past decade and a half he has inspired more than a dozen studies, biographies, and critical texts, including such highly specialized treatments as John Michalczyk's *André Malraux's "Espoir": The Propaganda-Art Film and the Spanish Civil War* (1977) and Axel Madsen's *Silk Roads: The Asian Adventures of André and Clara Malraux* (1987). And although his novels are not much read any more, two of the most important, *L'Espoir* (*Man's Hope*) and *La Condition humaine* (*Man's Fate*), have recently been brought back into print by Random House, the former in its ubiquitous Modern Library; three years ago Howard Fertig reprinted a translation of one of his

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minor works, *The Walnut Trees of Altenbourg*.

What makes a writer important when people have ceased to read him? In the case of Malraux, the answer lies in the facts of his biography. He was, to begin with, an utterly central figure of Western culture and politics. He was present at some of the most dramatic events of our century, and not only in his own country or even in Europe; he combined literature, art criticism, political militance (first on the Left, then the Right), and heroism in combat (both in the air and on land) in a fashion which excites admiration, envy, and (sometimes justifiable) disbelief. He also represented the archetype of the committed writer in the twentieth century, combining thought with action, art with high purpose, critical distance with proximity to power. For sheer intellectual glamour, no French figure—not even General de Gaulle, himself a writer of serious distinction—could challenge him. Finally, it is possible that Malraux's continuing fascination for foreign intellectuals has to do with their own special frustrations, a point to which we shall later return.

But first, some details of a life. André Malraux was born in Paris in 1901. His father, a shady financier, abandoned his wife and son early on, forcing them to take shelter in a village in Ile-de-France, where the boy's grandmother owned a small grocery. Although the circumstances of his boyhood were shabby-genteel, young André was taught to aspire to larger things—a lesson he absorbed a bit too thoroughly. Admitted to the elite Ecole Turgot, he left school without taking his *baccalauréat*, setting off to conquer Paris at the age of seventeen.

Postwar Paris was Malraux's university—offering the novice unrivaled museums and libraries, as well as galleries, bookshops, and cafés frequented by a large colony of talented artists and writers from many countries. He became a habitué of Montmartre, and almost immediately was accepted as part of a circle which included such yet unknown greats as Louis Aragon, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, and Paul Eluard. From buying and selling rare books he went briefly into publishing books himself, finally settling in journalism. This was a profession for which Malraux was eminently suited, since he was capable of working in great spurts of energy and could meet stringent deadlines without difficulty. At the same time, it allowed him to continue to live in a bohemian fashion—late nights and no fixed hours.

He was married young. His first wife was Clara Goldschmidt, a daughter of a German Jewish family of some means which had settled in France a generation before. The marriage license listed Malraux as being "of no occupation," and in fact for some months thereafter he did nothing to belie the designation. When he finally ran short of cash, rather than getting a real job he decided to go to Cambodia to sack the ruins of a temple at Banteay Srei of its statuary. If all went as planned, the booty would be shipped to the United States, and he and his bride could live on the proceeds "for two or three years."

The couple set off for the Orient in October 1923, on steamship tickets paid for by Malraux's father. Braving extraordinary physical discomfort, the couple made their way through the Cambodian jungles to their objective. Before the theft could be successfully completed, however, Malraux was arrested by the colonial authorities. The charge was misappropriation of antiquities belonging to the French state, but by mobilizing his contacts in literary Paris, Malraux managed to put the colonial authorities on the defensive. A galaxy of French editors and writers bombarded the governor's palace in Hanoi with offers to testify to Malraux's great value to literature—a value which, to say the least, had yet to be demonstrated. An advertisement in *Nouvelles Littéraires* even printed a petition—signed by such luminaries as François Mauriac, Roger Martin du Gard, and Gaston Gallimard—arguing that "a three-year imprisonment could prevent the achievement that [France] had the right . . . to expect of him." In the event, Malraux escaped conviction on a legal technicality, but the experience of justice at the hands of French

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colonial authorities—his biographers habitually tell us—suddenly turned him into a committed anti-imperialist. Moreover, even though he failed to benefit financially from the looting of Banteay Srei, he returned to France far more famous than he had left it. The experience also convinced him that Indochina could be a very advantageous springboard to a literary career. It was a sound decision, as were most of the others which he took at successive turning points in his professional life.

In 1925, Malraux and Clara returned to Indochina, this time to engage in both politics and literature. With Paul Monin, a liberal French lawyer dedicated to colonial reform, Malraux started a daily, *L'Indochine* (later *L'Indochine enchainée*), and plunged hip-deep into local politics, even becoming an activist in the Young Annam Movement. During this period he also visited China for the first time, making contact with leaders of the Kuo Mintang (KMT) and the nascent Chinese Communist Party. While Malraux's activities made little impact on the French colonial regime, they did provide him with excellent material for novels. His first, *Les Conquérants* (*The Conquerors*), dealing with the Canton general strike, was published shortly after his return to France in 1928, and his second, *La Voie royale* (*The Royal Way*), a fictionalized version of his expedition to Cambodia, appeared the following year.

The Conquerors was an instant best-seller, and catapulted Malraux to literary fame and financial security. He was immediately given a position at the prestigious Gallimard publishing firm as editor in charge of their art books. The Orient had proven an investment so sound as to lure Malraux back twice more: in 1929, he undertook a land journey with Clara across Central Asia (motivated partly by a plan—never brought to fruition—to rescue Leon Trotsky, then interned in Alma-Ata), and in 1931, he returned to China.

Out of the Chinese trip came his greatest and most commercially successful novel, *La Condition humaine* (*Man's Fate*) (Prix Goncourt, 1933), a reconstruction of the events surrounding the 1928 suppression of the Shanghai commune by Chiang Kai-shek. *Man's Fate* is steeped in the heady wine of revolutionary romanticism—a heroic tragedy particularly appealing to young people searching for a political faith. With its publication Malraux became the most glamorous and talented novelist broadly associated with the French Left, but also literary Paris's leading exponent of art as a tool of political militance. When his old friend Drieu La Rochelle objected that art and politics could not be mixed, Malraux frostily replied that "literature is not made to decorate bookshelves. It is an instrument of war, for attack and defense against the enemy."

Though initially attracted to Trotskyism, by the time the outcome of the power struggle in the Soviet Union was clear, Malraux had drawn closer to the French Communist Party. While he never actually joined it—partly because he objected to the literary canons of "socialist realism," which he courageously attacked at a Moscow congress of writers in 1934—he was quite ready to serve as the Party's chief cultural ornament. As it was, his novels appealed to just about every kind of philo-Communist except actual Party members themselves. In private, Communist leaders tended to dismiss him as a spoiled, self-indulgent bourgeois; on the other hand, alone of speakers at Party rallies, Malraux was capable of attracting people from high society, some of whom eventually provided financial support for Party activities.

Malraux proved of even greater value to the Communist cause during the Spanish Civil War. From the beginning he recognized that the Loyalist crusade would become one of the great causes of the decade, and he rushed to Madrid shortly after Franco's pronunciamento in June 1936 to offer his support to the embattled Republic. Shocked by the disparity of military assets, he offered to create a volunteer air force. Because the Popular Front was now in power in France, he was able to convince the Air Ministry to release two dozen planes for this purpose,

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and he managed to recruit twenty-nine pilots of polyglot origins to fly them.

Malraux's greatest contribution to the Loyalist cause was not enhanced air capability, however, but a dramatic increase in morale. He understood that to convince the Republicans that they were not alone was probably worth a division in itself, revealing a precocious understanding of the role that symbols and ideas would henceforth play in modern warfare. This is not to gainsay his actual military gifts: in the event, Malraux proved something of a natural as a leader of men in battle. His Escadre España won the battle of Medellín for the Loyalists, and developed many of the tactics that were later successfully used by the Republic's air force. Malraux's squadron fought its last engagement at the battle of Teruel during Christmas 1936, where it lost most of its planes. By then the political temperature in France had changed, and Malraux was unable to persuade Blum's government to replace them. Demobilized, he was shunted off to the United States on a Spanish diplomatic passport to raise funds for the Republic. On his return to France he turned his Spanish experiences into *L'Espoir* (*Man's Hope*), his last novel written from the point of view of the Left.

It was in Spain that Malraux's disenchantment with Communism began. There, like the British writer George Orwell (who served in another part of the peninsula, in the International Brigades), he was shocked to discover that Comintern representatives were far more interested in purging dissident leftists than in fighting Franco. Only the larger cause of the Republic convinced him to hold his silence on these matters (as well as on the Moscow trials, which he knew to be a fraud). With the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939, however, Malraux was suddenly released from further thralldom. In the summer of 1940, while the French Communists were preaching "revolutionary defeatism" before the advancing German forces, he enlisted as a private in the French army. Captured by the Germans in June, he was eventually released after the armistice (actually, the surrender) at Compiègne.

By this time Clara's place in his life had been taken by Josette Clotis, a younger woman whom he had met in 1932 and with whom he had been carrying on an affair more or less continuously ever since. (Clara returned the favor by receiving many of Malraux's pilots in the suite of her Madrid hotel.) Josette's family was conservative and moderately well-to-do, and it was to their villa on the Riviera that he escaped the occupied zone in January 1941, leaving his wife and daughter to face Nazi-occupied Paris alone. Though eager to divorce Clara, Malraux understood instinctively that to deprive her of the protection of his name would be tantamount to signing her death warrant. As it was, Malraux was never to actually marry Josette, though she was to bear him two sons before her death late in the war.

Like most Frenchmen, Malraux accepted the armistice and the collapse of the Third Republic with little regret, and did his best to continue his life as if nothing had happened at all. During 1941 and 1942 he spent most of his time working on the book which became *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* (*The Walnut Trees of Altenbourg*), part novel, part family memoir. But when the tide of the war began to turn in early 1944, Malraux bestirred himself, and by April was involved in the Resistance under the *nom de guerre* of Colonel Berger, commanding fifteen hundred men in three departments—the Lot, the Dordogne, and the Corrèze. Captured by the Germans on July 22, 1944, he was quite literally saved by the Normandy invasion, which turned the tide and forced his captors to take flight. Resuming his military activities, he, with his unit, followed the right flank of the (reconstituted) French army as it marched up the Rhône and eventually captured Strasbourg. At the end of the war he had received both the Croix de Guerre and the Croix de la Libération.

A distaste for Communism and Communists, begun in Spain and deepened by the craven conduct of the Party in 1940, matured into stronger feelings during Malraux's

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period in the Resistance. He was particularly troubled by the Communists' obvious intention to turn the network of *maquis* into a skeleton government, poised to seize power the moment that the Vichy state collapsed. (He had seen the dress rehearsal in Spain, and recognized the main contours of the plot.) This is what attracted Malraux to General Charles de Gaulle, whom he served as Minister of Information in the Provisional Government of 1945-46. Indeed, in many ways Malraux was de Gaulle's greatest political "find," since as a former man of the Left, he was best positioned to neutralize the immediate postwar appeal of the Communist Party.

Having abandoned the Left altogether, Malraux's new ideal was "a self-supporting France, republican and compassionate, but orderly." After de Gaulle's resignation, he became one of five charter members of the new Rassemblement du Peuple Français (RPF), and its dominant ideologist. Once again he found himself lending his literary prestige to a political party, and in fact no one other than de Gaulle could attract such crowds to RPF rallies. As if to underline the change in his politics, Malraux also altered his domestic situation. He now divorced Clara and married Madeleine Malraux, his brother's widow, whose charms included a capacious brick house in the fashionable suburb of Boulougne-sur-Seine.

Between 1946 and de Gaulle's return to power in 1958, Malraux divided his time between RPF activities and writing art books (*Les Voix du silence* [*Voices of Silence*], *Le Musée imaginaire* [*The Museum without Walls*]). Though still a major figure in French letters, he occupied a far less commanding position than before the war. The dominant personality of the postwar decade was Jean-Paul Sartre, which put the new, conservative Malraux well outside the boundaries of the fashionable. Between Malraux and Sartre there was no love lost, to say the very least: as Malraux was wont to remind people, the existentialist guru had sat out the war in Paris, pontificating at the Café Flore (and having his plays produced), while committed Resistance militants (like Malraux) were facing the Gestapo. Though Raymond Aron and Albert Camus were more intellectually formidable opponents of Sartre and his *Temps Modernes* circle, Malraux was still capable of inflicting deep wounds with a single shot: his most famous phrase from this period was "Moscow is not to our left, it is to the east."

With de Gaulle's return to power in 1958, Malraux was once again summoned to serve in the cabinet, first as Minister of Information, then as Minister of Culture, a position created especially for him. By now, however, Malraux was intoxicated by power, and all other considerations, including those of principle, took a back seat. Though he had justified France's efforts to remain in Algeria partly by citing the need to protect those natives that had thrown in their lot with the colonial power, he remained silent when, after the 1962 Evian accords, thousands of collaborators were abandoned by France to the tender mercies of the victorious Algerian FLN. Indeed, at no time did he utter any criticism of Gaullist policies, even when they were diametrically opposed to his own previously-articulated public positions.

As Minister of Culture, Malraux, the great novelist of revolution, now became a "rock of order," a patron of the arts armed with huge budgets and vast ministerial prerogatives. As if to underline this new state of affairs, he abandoned Madeleine and moved into the Petit Trianon at Versailles, where he wandered about in a red dressing gown and military boots. He resumed the bohemian lifestyle of his youth, but this time on a far more opulent scale: breakfasting at noon, keeping odd and erratic hours, eating and drinking too much. While he enjoyed the extraordinary comforts provided by power, he clearly missed the tensions and excitement of the old days; to respond to parliamentary interpellations was no substitute for combat. At night he would lie awake piling up grievances. He once announced to an astounded aide: "I have spent the whole night hating."

To relieve his boredom, Malraux resumed

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an old affair with Louise de Vilmorin, an aristocratic acquaintance from prewar days. In 1968 he moved into her apartment on the right bank and also began spending increasing amounts of time at her château at Varrières-le-Brisson, just outside of Paris. Cossetted by Louise, her family, and her ample staff (both in town and in the country), Malraux lost all interest in his ministerial work. Instead, preferred to remain at his new country residence, acting out a French version of Evelyn Waugh: railing against Paris as the epicenter of "stench, poverty, and luxury," while fussing with the servants over whether the floors were properly swept or the furniture adequately polished—an ironic coda to a life so much of which had been lived in the apparent service of egalitarian ideals.

In the mid-Sixties Malraux had revisited China and been shocked by the excesses of the Cultural Revolution there, an account which appears in his *Anti-mémoires* (1967) and bears rereading even today. Here were the noble dreams of *Man's Fate* made flesh—to Malraux's horror and distaste. In a lengthy interview with Mao he was particularly chilled by the Chinese leader's response to his argument that the Mandarin class was no longer a threat—"They are beginning to have children." Returning home, he was confronted by a pale imitation of the same upheaval in the streets of Paris. Far from frightening Malraux, the *événements* of 1968 merely invited his icy contempt, possibly because the student rebels—by turns arrogant, destructive, and blind—reminded him so clearly of his youthful self. By now Malraux regarded socialism as nothing more than a fantasy, and had lost the patience to argue with those who thought otherwise. To one young revolutionary who reproached him at a public meeting, he shot back, "We are not, all of us, *really* going to walk about in identical yellow tunics à la Saint-Simon, all buttoned at the back?"

French socialism was still more than a decade away from power, but Gaullism had played out its cycle. In 1969 de Gaulle resigned and his Minister of Culture departed with him. Malraux survived for several years more in an affluent semi-obscurity. To be sure, he was not completely forgotten; his books never went out of print, and he was occasionally quoted in the press. But without a hero—and a heroic movement—to attach himself to, Malraux could find no real place for himself in French public life. His passing in 1976 can therefore be seen as something of a merciful release, from a world that no longer inspired his interest—and, if truth be told, the reverse as well.

Recited this way, Malraux's life seems like nothing more than a twentieth-century retelling of Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir*. There are, in fact, some remarkable similarities between Julien Sorel and André Malraux: both began life with a chip on their shoulder due to the class deprivation (in Sorel's case, humble origins; in Malraux's, recent downward mobility); both were men on the make who used their attractiveness to women—particularly rich women—to leverage their ascent in society. Both adopted and discarded ideologies according to convenience. Both were great improvisers and capable of resolving difficult situations by sheer force of energy. In the end both were, as someone once said of the Mexican general Santa Anna, "faithless to men, women, and causes."

Typically Malraux's biographers have tried to finesse the jagged edges of his career—to find a coherent pattern of ideals where there was often only opportunism and self-seeking. Try as they might, they cannot deny that Malraux was by turns vain and selfish, greedy and childish, arrogant and snobbish, self-indulgent and ruthless. But they are not wrong to insist that he was much more than this. To start with, he was an extraordinarily gifted writer, capable of bringing new themes and techniques to the French novel. He was, for example, the first major writer of fiction to borrow techniques from the cinema—the jump-cut, the flashback, the wipe; he was also the first writer ever to treat air combat in epic style. He had a marvelous eye for detail, and a great sense of history: the settings of his novels—particularly in the Far East and

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in Spain—were "big stories," not merely in France but throughout the world.

In matters personal, Malraux could display enormous personal courage and self-effacement when the situation demanded it. Evidently he possessed a remarkable capacity to lead men in dangerous and difficult situations. Having never flown a plane, he became head of a small air force in Spain—and successfully so. He commanded as the equivalent of a brigadier in the Resistance, having never risen above the rank of private in the French army. For all his later megalomania, as a Resistance commander Malraux refused to wear his insignia of rank or to claim any special privileges for himself; he was always willing to put himself at equal risk to his men. His personal charisma, so evident on the platform and on the battlefield, apparently carried over into ministerial suites as well: almost singlehandedly he convinced the French government to sell arms to Spain at a time when public opinion was overwhelmingly in favor of what passed for "non-intervention."

He was also one of the first postwar European intellectuals to make anti-Communism respectable, partly because as a one-time fellow-traveler (and a distinguished one at that) he could speak with particular authority. But also because he made a forceful case that—contrary to what the traditional Right in France imagined and feared—Stalinism in power meant not the empowerment of the working class but its degradation. The early Malraux had told audiences that Communism was the hope of the future; the latter Malraux announced his discovery that it was nothing but a vast historic swindle. It is true—as leftist critics have not been slow to point out—that the shift in ideological gears eventually led to a comfortable place for Malraux at the sumptuous table of triumphant Gaullism, but not immediately or inevitably so: after 1946 de Gaulle's return to power was by no means foreordained. In fact, by throwing in his lot with the RPF Malraux drastically reduced his hold on what had once mattered to him most—Parisian literary fashion.

And it was precisely Malraux's evolution toward the Right that undermined his place in French letters, since during the Forties and Fifties the Communist Party possessed a remarkably strong influence on French education, or rather, on educators who staffed the lycées in Paris and the provinces and contributed to the major literary journals. (The influence of Sartre and his infamous circle hardly needs to be commented upon.) Paradoxically, when the Party (and cultural philo-Communism) declined in the mid-Seventies, Malraux's stature plummeted still further: this time from a lack of interest in the heroic themes (class struggle, colonial liberation, international solidarity, etc.) to which he dedicated so much of his novelistic work. To put it bluntly, today we know a bit too much about how things turned out in Cambodia or China (or how they might well have turned out in Spain) to be greatly moved by revolutionary tales of the Twenties and Thirties. Moreover, a novelist of "commitment" has little to say to an age of increasing ideological disbelief—which, given what "commitment" led to in so many countries, is probably just as well.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Malraux's career is how early he peaked as a novelist—really, after *Man's Fate* there was very little in the way of fiction. Most of his subsequent books were either art criticism or semi-novelized autobiography—and we are talking here about virtually forty years, which is to say, nearly three-quarters of Malraux's active career. Herein lies, I think, the key to his continuing international renown: Malraux was one of the first of Western writers to become a literary superstar, to enjoy fame, honors, even power as much or more for who he *was* (how he lived, with whom he lived, and what he had done when he was not writing), as for what he had actually written. His appeal to Western (and non-Western) intellectuals consisted precisely in the fact that *as a writer* he had succeeded in casting himself in a heroic historical role. He therefore represents the victory par excellence of the intellectual over alienation and

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powerlessness—and in a country where the fruits of power are particularly sweet.

Of course, today neither in France nor elsewhere are intellectual superstars much in evidence; the closest contemporary equivalent is the former president of Czechoslovakia Václav Havel, and he is the product of a specific set of circumstances unlikely to repeat themselves. Contemporary biographies of Malraux are heavily pervaded by a period feeling—reading them is rather like leafing through the rotogravure sections of prewar newspapers, printed in rust-colored inks with sepia half-tones. One recognizes the world and the people in it, and can find the interaction between the two at times interesting and even occasionally inspiring. But the story itself belongs to a different age of faith, and possesses for us little more than anecdotal or antiquarian interest.

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Poems *by Enid Shomer, Timothy Steele & James Aitchison*

Seeing cousins after many years

It's their eyes you notice first:
mostly blue and mottled
like the aggies of childhood.
There are firsts, seconds, thirds, once
and twice removed and more
distant still and still
somehow your blood, your history:
Cousin Lana, now 52, who hired a hypnotist
for her sweet sixteen party
(himself a distant cousin, dead now
of an overdose). You remember the fixed
smile of dolls in her hands, rollers
tunneling through her hair, the early
reports about sex. Now she says
her husband is dead—nearly a year.
Eleven hundred miles away, the family
network full of holes, you hadn't heard.

Around the room you count eighteen,
some as skittish as if they stood

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on rungs of ladders leaned
against the walls and weren't coming down
for anything.

Later, facing east, toward Jerusalem,
the rabbi lights the candle
that will burn a week for the deceased.
You exchange addresses with a few,
cry with them for the definition
of growing up that means to go
away, for the cliché that death is
what brings this bittersweetness
to you over platters of turkey
and tongue and pastrami and dip
and bottles of schnapps.
The cousins' shy and aging and mostly blue
eyes shine all around the room, jewels
in a giant family scatter pin
spread across this night like the stars
you wished on wildly as a girl,
knowing your words would never reach them.

—*Enid Shomer*

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Anecdote of the sugar bowl

Stern, hands on hips, the sugar bowl
Rebuked our lack of self-control
As we nine children kicked to cable
Intelligence beneath the table,
Bruising one another's shins
With these non-verbal bulletins.

As if a kind of referee,
Like Stevens' jar in Tennessee,
While coalitions came and went,
It was a stable referent
And from the chaos drew a meal
And brought our wilderness to heel.

I can't remember, looking back,
What led to this or that attack,
To blows I did or didn't strike.
I just recall it—matronlike
And arms akimbo, fixing me
With its fierce objectivity.

—*Timothy Steele*

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The inheritance

The war, the hospitals—he was away
so long he was a stranger when he died;
I knew his face better from holiday
snapshots than from the life; and when I tried
to weep there were few tears. Later, I thought
I owed him part of my life for the years
he lost and for his early death. I ought
to have known that my father re-appears
in me no matter what I think: I feel
about books, craftsmanship, woodlands at dusk
just as he once did, his coded will
decoded as I sit here at my desk
translating impulses that might fulfil
my father's purpose and complete his task.

—James Aitchison

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Music

On seeing "Capriccio"

by Samuel Lipman

Thanks to the vagaries of PBS's summer schedule, I finally achieved, in a manner of speaking, one of my long-time goals: I saw a staged performance of *Capriccio*, Richard Strauss's last opera, written in 1941. I became aware of *Capriccio* about 1951. At that time, I was an avid seventeen-year-old record collector with a major concentration on the later operas of Richard Wagner. But in my Wagnerolatry I had room for Strauss as well. Born in 1864, Strauss, after all, had been dubbed "Richard the Second" by critics even before the turn of the century.[1] In the late 1940s, I had been immensely taken by Dimitri Mitropoulos's hair-raising New York Philharmonic broadcast of Strauss's *Elektra* (1906-8), with Astrid Varnay in the title role. This, I suppose, predisposed me to Strauss's operatic rather than his orchestral music, and I was fortunate to obtain two Deutsche Grammophon 78s of excerpts from *Der Rosenkavalier* (1910) by such distinguished Strauss performers as sopranos Tiana Lemnitz and Erna Berger, along with some excerpts led by the composer himself. These were quickly followed in my purchases by a Lemnitz *Rosenkavalier* LP, recorded pre-1952. There was a marvelous 78 recording too of Ariadne's Monologue from *Ariadne auf Naxos* (revised version 1916), sung in 1948 by the short-lived Maria Cebotari.

But all these records were of reasonably well-known material. Less well known was the final scene of *Capriccio*. The version I had, on 78, was conducted by the great Clemens Krauss, with Krauss's wife, the edgy-toned soprano Viorica Ursuleac, singing the leading role of the Countess; at the time I believe I was unaware that Ursuleac and Krauss had created the 1942 world première of the opera. A few years later, in the early 1950s, the wonderful Swiss artist Lisa Della Casa recorded the closing scene (including the orchestral introduction) with the conductor Heinrich Hollreiser and the Vienna Philharmonic, as did Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (in one of her best roles) with the Philharmonia Orchestra under Otto Ackermann.

Curiously, though I found the music on these recordings ravishing, they were all I knew of *Capriccio* until the mid-1970s, despite the fact that there had been a superb recording of the complete opera in 1960 by Schwarzkopf and the conductor Wolfgang Sawallisch, and another remarkable recording by Gundula Janowitz with the eminent conductor Karl Böhm in 1972. Indeed, it was not until I started writing about music that I began to take late, post-*Ariadne*, Strauss seriously. The reason for this lapse on my part was simple: from the late 1950s to the early 1970s I had concentrated all my energies on playing the piano, a jealous taskmistress indeed; as Strauss wrote no solo-piano works, he therefore vanished from my musical horizon. As a result I missed the only

1 In this context, the riposte attributed to the pianist/composer Busoni deserves mention: "If Richard, then Wagner; if Strauss, then Johann."

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fully professional staged performances of *Capriccio* that have ever been given in New York City: those by the New York City Opera, in an English translation, in 1965-66 and again in 1969.

But from the mid-1970s on, I got to know the *Capriccio* music well, at first from the complete recordings. More important, I bought a copy of the piano score and played it (and sang it, in my toneless voice) endlessly, reveling in the composer's masterly manipulation of his lyrically enchanting musical material, from the ravishing introductory String Sextet in the orchestra to the great horn solo and the concluding scene that sums up Strauss's lifelong idealization of the soprano voice. When in 1986 *Capriccio* was given in a semi-staged version at Carnegie Hall, I found myself enraptured by the music and charmed by the words, but, because of the rudimentary staging, still in the dark as to what the opera might look like in full performance. But now, I suppose, my ignorance has been at least semi-cured: the PBS telecast, taken from a live performance or performances at the 1990 Salzburg Festival, presented what must be taken as the currently reigning international standard; I can now say that I have seen, or at least watched, the opera not just once, but several times.

Capriccio, which owed it origins in Strauss's mind to the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), was provided with a libretto by Clemens Krauss, to whom the work is dedicated. The story, set in 1777 in a rococo château near Paris, is simple. A young, beautiful, and very cultivated widowed Countess and her equally cultivated brother are celebrating her birthday by entertaining a group of artists and actors. The company includes Olivier, a poet, and Flamand, a composer, who are each in love with the Countess; Clairon, a famous actress with whom the Countess's brother, the Count, is having a liaison; La Roche, a great theater director; and two Italian singers. The talk—the opera is subtitled "A Conversation-piece for Music"—is about the relative importance of music and words: drawing upon the title of a 1786 opera by Salieri, *Prima la musica e poi le parole* ("First the music and then the words"), Strauss turns first this way then that; the question must have obsessed him, as an opera composer, all his working life. The poet writes a sonnet for his beloved Countess. She finds it beautiful, but then when she hears it set to music by the composer, she finds it still more affecting. The actress and her aristocratic lover add a welcome touch of cynicism to the proceedings. The masterful theater director, modeled on the famous Max Reinhardt (who had directed the stage premières of both *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Ariadne auf Naxos* and who, with Strauss and his librettist Hugo von Hofmannstahl, had founded the Salzburg Festival in 1920), holds up the integrity of what Wagner called the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the total art work), words and music held together and intensified by theater.

At the end, the Countess, having set her heart on an opera written for her by her two competing lovers, still cannot make up her mind about which is more important, words or music. But as the opera, being an opera, ends with music, not words, *Capriccio*, in its final magical moments, does provide the answer, and it is Salieri's: *Prima la musica, e poi le parole*. One should hasten to add, however, that here there are no losers, only winners, for the composer and the poet describe themselves early in the opera as "*verliebte Feinde—freundliche Gegner*" ("beloved enemies—friendly opponents"); the goal of the opera is not triumph, but only art and beauty.

Words and music, the subject of the opera, are of course the stuff of opera itself; the personal relationships—between Countess and Count, between poet and composer, between poet, composer, and theater director—lovingly parallel the conflict, and the mutual attraction and dependency, of words and music. One reason the opera is rarely staged in America is that so much depends on the words being heard clearly and understood by the audience, unless one accepts the idea (which often tempts me) that even in opera the music is all. Unfortunately, Amer-

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ican opera houses—at least those that might attract the distinguished singers that *Capriccio* requires—are much too large for the singers' sung words to be heard; furthermore, clear diction, even in the case of the most famous singers, is now at a specially low ebb. And then, here in America, there is the problem of language: American audiences know no German, and English is not a grateful language for today's singers. It might be thought that supertitles, the current operatic savior, would cure the language problem, but it seems highly likely that whatever their merits for the comprehension of other and more massive works, they would not work in *Capriccio*. This would be so because supertitles force the audience to divide its attention between the visual projection of the words high up on the proscenium and the music and the staging; this distraction would destroy the intimacy which so distinguishes *Capriccio* from all of Strauss's other operas.

Rare as staged performances of *Capriccio* are in this country, it is hard for me to believe that this television broadcast provided an ideal opportunity to see the opera. Much of the problem was musical. The conductor, Horst Stein, despite his expansive gestures, was little better than a time-beating *Kapellmeister*. The Vienna Philharmonic, at least as heard on television through reasonably satisfactory audio equipment, was tonally a bit rough and even loveless. The male singers, with Wolfgang Schöne as the Count, Eberhard Büchner as the composer, Andreas Schmidt as the poet, and Theo Adam as the theater director, were certainly of international caliber, but they were given to frequent vocal bluster, over-singing rather than letting the notes (and the words!) speak for themselves. The actress was played—and perhaps once again, over-played—for maximum comic effect by Iris Vermillion. The only real vocal disappointment—and it was major—was Anna Tomowa-Sintow in the role of the Countess. I have found her voice in live performance to have a marked wobble; it certainly did on this broadcast. Furthermore, what she lacked in vocal security, she also lacked in the special kind of radiance that can transfigure all of Strauss's great soprano roles—Sophie and the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier* being perhaps the best-known examples.

But of course this broadcast was vastly more than a musical performance: it was a *staged* performance. Every word and every note had to be heard through the images on the screen—the acting of the singers, the requirements of the stage director, Johannes Schaaf, and the sets and costumes of the designer Andreas Reinhardt. The singers, as so often on television, seemed utterly determined to make each utterance *count*; gestures and movements, doubtless at the request of the director, were large and often frenetic; the whole production had an excitable, rather than an exciting, character. The singers ran, rather than walked; the Countess paced back and forth across the huge Salzburg stage, I assume to demonstrate her doubts about the relative importance of words and music, and perhaps about the relative personal attractiveness of the poet and the composer; I must add that, in contrast, her facial impassivity when she was *not* singing added a strange element of unreality to a work and a situation that already demand a certain suspension of disbelief.

The mainly black-and-white sets seemed unconvincingly drawn from Art Deco, in the style of the ocean liner *Normandie*, with much emphasis on glass and what looked on television like chrome; there was an air of 1930s interior design about everything. For some reason, the male characters began the opera in quasi-modern dress but by the end were put in traditional eighteenth-century costume; the Countess began and ended her role wearing a snood, but in the middle of the opera wore a wig. It is also past my understanding why the actress, wearing an enormous gray fur coat, arrived at the château in what appeared to be a fancy turn-of-the-1930s open automobile, but departed, wearing a blue wrap lightly trimmed with fur, in a horsedrawn carriage. I suppose, however, that we ought to be grateful that *Capriccio* did not receive a full Peter Sellars treatment, which might on this occasion have turned

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the Countess into Madonna, the poet and composer into her "creative team," the actress into Roseanne Barr, and the theater director into one of the A&R men responsible for all the MTV megahits. Perhaps for such a transformation, we shall have to wait for a fuller unfolding of the new regime at Salzburg, in which the "reactionary" influence of the late Herbert von Karajan has been completely replaced by the trendiness of his successor, the very up-to-date Gerard Mortier.

I should spare a word, too, for the English-language titles on the broadcast, subtitles in the case of television rather than the supertitles we are now being given in opera. I still find them horribly intrusive, and they make listening to the music while watching the screen very difficult. The viewer's tendency to try to match the printed translation to the sung words is irresistible; even when one only looks at the subtitles to follow the story, the pressure to *read* seems so great that it is only by actively looking away that the music (and the words in the original) can again be heard; but looking away from the television image just to escape the subtitles defeats the whole idea of television production as an improvement on a mere sound recording. It is an irony that by adding subtitles to *Capriccio* the impression given is that the words are indeed superior to the music, and have won a cinematic triumph denied them by the composer and the librettist.

Of course there is an argument to be made, and a strong one, that this broadcast enabled millions—perhaps even including me—to see *Capriccio* who never will have the slightest chance to see the work in the opera house. Such a consideration is doubtless endemic to democracy itself—to what Matthew Arnold called, in the title of one of his most important *Discourses in America*, "Numbers." Perhaps it just has to remain an irony that Strauss's most refined opera can only be witnessed in late-twentieth-century America on a designedly vulgar medium.

I have purposely left till the end of this article a gnawing consideration about *Capriccio* that has nothing to do with the rarity of its live performance, nothing to do with its PBS television broadcast from Salzburg, and nothing to do with the quality of its performance and staging. I refer to the remarkable fact that Strauss completed this masterpiece of verbal delicacy and wit, marked everywhere by radiant and ecstatic melody, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, less than a hundred miles from the infamous Berchtesgaden, in the early August of 1941. At that moment, Hitler and Germany, having gobbled up France and leveled much of England's cities, were invading Russia and matching Stalin atrocity for atrocity; only a few months were to pass before the Wannsee Conference of January 1942, at which the "final solution" was planned in detail. *Capriccio* was art, and the Nazi regime was evil. *Capriccio* was not just art, it was a kind of perfect art, a creation of high civilization meant for the ages. But Hitler's evil was not just evil, it was a kind of perfect evil, a creation of high barbarism meant for the ages. Here art and evil co-existed; we can describe the contradiction, but we shall never understand it. Just living with it seems difficult enough.

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Art

Chagall's theater

by Jed Perl

The wall paintings that Marc Chagall created in the winter of 1920-21 for the interior of the State Jewish Chamber Theater in Moscow are in marvelous, dreamy, pale colors. These paintings are packed with activity; they present Chagall's panoramic vision of a Yiddish theater that is a theater of life. Chagall reimagines the old Jewish world of the shtetl in an exaggerated, stylized form, and in the process he creates a modern mythology of origins and transformations.

At the center of the largest, mural-size composition, *Introduction to the Jewish Theater*, Chagall presents Chagall himself, carried in the arms of the great Russian art critic Abram Efros. The weight of narrative that the artist is holding aloft in these paintings is considerable, yet he carries it easily, as easily as Efros carries Chagall. The paintings are airy and buoyant. At the Guggenheim SoHo, where the seven paintings that make up the ensemble are hung in one room so that we have a good sense of their original arrangement, the initial impression is of a wintry rainbow composed of overlapping planes of violet and celadon and yellow and white and gray.[1] This effect of soft, prismatic light is underscored by the medium: gouache and tempera on canvas. The matte surfaces are in sync with Chagall's style, which is based on drawing, on complex linear arabesques. Close up, the effect is exhilarating. One moves from incident to incident, relishing the way that Chagall stylizes an arm or a leg, incorporates Hebrew lettering, paints a teeny scene-within-a-scene, or includes passages that are done by pressing paint-dipped pieces of lace against the canvas. Close up the paintings have the assurance of near-masterpieces. Yet as one moves farther away, to see how it all fits together, the effect can be dismaying. The great little incidents and the Cubist play-of-forms don't exactly add up. It all seems a little tendentious, Rube Goldberg-ish. From a dozen feet away, these extraordinarily interesting paintings look almost banal. Yet the insufficiency of the overall design does not leave one feeling cheated. These Chagalls are full of wonderful things, and though they are not great paintings, they are dazzlingly brilliant and lovable works. They are immensely lovable works. This is the most important thing about them.

What other modern artist gives us such an easy opulence of imagery? *Introduction to the Jewish Theater* is a view of the life of the theater, including portraits of major figures, such as the Jewish Theater's director, Alexander Granovsky. What dominates, the scholar Avram Kampf has written, is "the informal air of the commedia dell'arte and its closest

1 "Marc Chagall and the Jewish Theater" opened at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo on September 23 and is on view through January 17, 1993. It will then travel to the Art Institute of Chicago (January 30-May 10, 1993). A catalogue, with essays by Benjamin Harshav and Susan Compton, has been published by the Guggenheim (272 pages, $50; $35 paper).

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Jewish manifestation, the Purim jesters." Chagall discovers in this Jewish theatrical tradition echoes of other theatrical traditions; he enriches his scene with echoes of Callot's prints of the commedia dell'arte, of Seurat's *Circus* and *Sideshow*, of Degas, of Picasso's Saltimbanques, of the front cloth and costumes that Picasso did for *Parade* in 1916, and perhaps of Sonia Delaunay's *Bal Bullier* (1913). Of the other six canvases, four are allegories of the arts that offer Jewish analogies to traditional Western representations of music, dance, drama, and literature. These works tap into a lineage of allegorical decorative cycles that goes back to the Middle Ages and has been transformed by every succeeding period—the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Rococo, the Neoclassical. Another kind of pageantry, the pageantry of a marriage ceremony, is alluded to in the long narrow frieze of a table set for a wedding feast; this painting is both a metaphysical still life in the European tradition and a meditation on Jewish decorative traditions. The last painting, *Love on the Stage*, is a Constructivist abstraction, through which Chagall has laced his own phantasmagorically narrative imagery. The incandescence of the paintings has to do with Chagall's obvious sense that everything is open to him. He works unselfconsciously, letting things fall (or maybe rise is a better word) as they may. When he uses a Torah scribe as the figure that represents literature, there is nothing forced about the introduction of a Jewish figure into an allegorical scheme that obviously has pagan roots. The whole adventure of these decorations—which were originally located in the room where the plays were performed—goes on in a magical, elevated place. Traditions meld and interpenetrate in the high, soft, white light.

Chagall did all of this very fast, in a matter of months. In his autobiography he recalled how "I flung myself at the walls . . . The canvases were stretched out on the floor. . . . Workers, actors walked over them. Rooms and corridors were in the process of being renovated, piles of shavings mingled with my tubes of paint, with my sketches . . . I too was stretched out on the floor . . . I set to work." The paintings, hanging in the Jewish Chamber Theater, became the center of the changing world of Yiddish theater, which was moving from a period of naturalism into a period of expressionism and abstraction. Opening night at the theater was a Shalom Aleichem triple bill (*Mazeltov*, *The Agents*, and *The Lie*), with sets by Chagall. When the troupe played in Berlin, a critic wrote: "In every theater there are moments when one may relax. Not here. Cubistic liveliness . . . they talk not only with their hands but almost with their hair, calves, soles, and toes. You think someone is walking and already he is lying down. You think someone is waiting and already he is fleeing."

Scholars tell us that a new acting style was influenced by Chagall's style, that actors began to take on the poses, the gestures that they found in his paintings. So in painting decorations for the theater, Chagall was helping to bring about a merger of the plastic and theatrical arts. To Chagall all of this must have seemed the most natural thing in the world. Around 1910, as a young man studying in Saint Petersburg, he'd gotten to know Leon Bakst, Nicholas Roerich, and others who were involved in the explosive experiments that, in the form of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, put the theater at the center of the opulent later stages of the Parisian avant-garde. In those years, all over Europe, the theater was a place where new ideas about art and literature were granted, beneath the proscenium arch, a special reality. No wonder an entire continent caught what Jean Cocteau, recalling the décor of the theaters where he'd gone in his youth, called the red and gold disease. It is also no wonder that these paintings of Chagall's don't exactly compose. It was all the artist could do, stretched out on the floor of the Jewish Chamber Theater with everything going on around him, to keep his multiple themes in buoyant, glorious motion.

These works—which have never before been seen in the United States—were among the last major ones that Chagall did in Rus-

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sia. In 1922 he left for good. Both before and after that, he was careful that he should not be typecast as a Jewish artist, as he felt some others in Paris had been or had allowed themselves to be. His attitude was delicate and elusive and canny. He wanted to take his place within international modernism, wanted to be an adopted son of the School of Paris, but also did not want to give up his patrimony. No other artist drew so deeply on the imagery of Eastern European Jewry. No other Jewish artist of his period had such a rich and complex relation to the modernism of Western Europe. By comparison, Soutine and Modigliani and Lipchitz bit off a small piece, and El Lissitzky, though at moments more radical than Chagall, was in no way so deep and nuanced and complex.

Chagall still awaits a definitive assessment. The retrospective organized by Susan Compton in 1985 (it was seen in Philadelphia) left him looking diminished, a modernist who at first almost hit the top and then slid down very far very fast. But I wonder if that show was really fair. It takes a curator with an extraordinary sensitivity to graphic style to pull out the wonderful things—many of which may actually be works on paper. And in order to choose among the later works, which are in an effulgent School of Paris manner, one must appreciate the true value of that kind of style, which I rather doubt Compton does. Another problem is that the pinnacle of the career is the series of stained glass windows in the synagogue of Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, which will of course never travel. It is here that it all comes together for Chagall. In Eastern Europe, Jews would prepare a stew called a cholent before the Sabbath, a stew that sat on the fire overnight. This cholent was a primal memory for all the Jews of Eastern Europe. In the South of France, where Chagall spent his later years, he no doubt learned about another kind of stew, the bouillabaisse. Somehow, in his art he managed to bring the beauty of the bouillabaisse (which actually includes unkosher ingredients) into line with the aromatic cholents of his youth. The result was the perfected decorative style of the Hadassah Hospital windows, which represent the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Edmund Wilson once wrote of Henry James, "Henry James *is* a first-rank writer in spite of certain obvious deficiencies. His work is incomplete . . . ; but it is in no respect second-rate, and he can be judged only in company with the greatest." I think that in the end we will find ourselves saying something along the same lines about Chagall.

The Guggenheim is to be commended for bringing these paintings to New York and for installing them beautifully, in a single room. A second gallery, containing some preparatory drawings and a selection of other works by Chagall, is a welcome addition. Unfortunately, the Guggenheim SoHo has not seen fit to leave this as a two-room show, but has virtually doubled its size by adding, as a kind of pre-exhibit, two more rooms that cover the history of the paintings and the Yiddish theater. Some explanatory wall texts are without a doubt necessary in an exhibit of this kind, but the kind of photo blowups and supergraphics presented here give what is really a brilliant small show an unpleasantly glossy overlay. Just outside the room containing the paintings, emblazoned on the wall in big purple letters, is Chagall's statement, from his autobiography, about his hopes of doing away "with the old Jewish theater, its psychological naturalism, its false beards. There on these walls I shall at least be able to do as I please and be free to show everything I believe to be indispensable to the rebirth of the national theater." Chagall's words are exciting to read, but the presentation of his words, as if they were one of Barbara Kruger's pieces of wall art, is depressing. If Chagall had wanted to turn his words into a wall piece he would no doubt have done it himself. Those two rooms full of preliminaries are an example of art-world mind control. They're heavy on historical context, but they don't prepare viewers at all for what the works look or feel like. That's probably just as well. Once we turn away from the wall texts we're enveloped by Chagall's beautiful imagination. He takes us in hand and we take off.

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Two American Cubists

by Karen Wilkin

I must admit that until I visited the exhibition "Suzy Frelinghuysen and George L. K. Morris, American Abstract Artists," I had seen relatively little work by either of the husband and wife team who are the show's protagonists.[1] Morris (1905-1975), I knew, was one of those affluent, sophisticated, well-traveled Americans—like his contemporary Lincoln Kirstein—who served as missionaries for Modernism at a time when most of their countrymen were wondering whether that newfangled European stuff really *was* art at all. I knew, too, that like Kirstein, Morris was an admirer of Gaston Lachaise and—again like Kirstein—had his portrait done by the expatriate French sculptor. (Even more impressive, Morris owned Lachaise's monumental reclining nude *La Montagne*, still in the Massachusetts woods where the artist and his patron sited it in 1935.) I had a less clear image of Frelinghuysen (1911-1988); I knew of her only as Morris's wife and as a painter.

Unlike Kirstein, who functioned as a sort of *éminence grise* in the American vanguard, Morris and Frelinghuysen were active participants. Morris was a frequent contributor of perceptive articles about Modernist art to *Partisan Review* in its early days (he was also a patron of the magazine), a founding member of American Abstract Artists, and, with Frelinghuysen, a regular in the group's exhibitions. The association was dedicated to a geometric art so high-minded that Mondrian himself agreed to join in 1940 when he moved to the U.S.: a cool, idealized abstraction that was the antithesis of the sentimental realism of the American Scene painters and a welcome antidote to the scenes of stalwart farmers and picturesque cotton-pickers so admired in the 1930s and early 1940s. Nonetheless, I knew that the American Scene's implacable enemy, Stuart Davis, regarded Morris and company (I almost said "his circle") as equally problematic, seeing their geometric compositions as arbitrary and unresponsive to the accidents of actuality that he believed were the artist's primary stimuli. But with all this accumulation of peripheral information, what did I really know about Morris's and Frelinghuysen's art?

My most concentrated exposure came in 1983, with the Carnegie Institute's ambitious touring exhibition *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944*, which included several works by each of the couple, along with many by their colleagues in AAA.

1 "Suzy Frelinghuysen and George L. K. Morris, American Abstract Artists: Aspects of Their Work and Collection" was on view at the Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts, from June 6 through October 25, and will travel to the Art Museum, Princeton University (November 14, 1992-January 31, 1993), and the Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee (February 14-April 11, 1993). A catalogue, by Debra Bricker Balken and Deborah Menaker Rothschild, has been published by the Williams College Museum of Art (64 pages, $18.95 paper).

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I remember having been puzzled by what I saw of Morris and surprised by Frelinghuysen. Morris perplexed me because he was represented by works ranging from the slightly embarrassing to the admirable. I recall a truly awful picture of a stylized Indian maiden, a spiky, shiny abstract sculpture just this side of gift-shop "Modern Art," and several tightly clenched, rigid, vaguely Cubist paintings. But I also remember a large, luminous canvas with floating, angular drawing, deeply informed by the most adventurous aspects of Cubism, that seemed to prefigure the open space and evocative signs of Adolph Gottlieb's most developed *Pictograph*s. Frelinghuysen surprised me because her modest, lyrical, Cubist-derived canvases, it struck me at the time, were elegant and extremely accomplished, more convincing and assured than the work of many of her fellow American Abstract Artists, including some far better known that she was. But that was about it.

The exhibition at Williams enlarged and altered my rather vague perceptions. I am still puzzled by Morris and even more surprised by Frelinghuysen, but I have a clearer sense of who they were as artists and what concerned them most deeply. A representative selection of paintings and sculptures by the pair, set in the context of international modernist works from their collection, allowed Morris and Frelinghuysen to declare themselves, quirks, foibles and all. The proximity of pictures that they knew intimately, by Braque, Picasso, Léger, Gris, Miró, and other modern masters, along with those by fellow members of AAA, made for illuminating comparisons and provocative suggestions of cross-fertilization.

Morris emerged the more erratic of the pair, possibly because he had a much longer life as a painter. His earliest work in the show was painted in 1929, when he was twenty-four, his last in 1972, three years before his death. By contrast, Frelinghuysen, although seemingly the more consistent artist, was represented by works spanning less than two decades, from 1934 to 1951. Morris, however, was the "serious" artist of the couple, the one with the formal art education at the Art Students League and the Académie Moderne in Paris, the one conversant with up-to-date Modernist theory. Frelinghuysen, trained as a musician—she had a brief, brilliant operatic career in the late Forties and early Fifties—was self-taught as a painter; she drew and painted naturalistically, for pleasure, from childhood, and was converted to abstraction by Morris. Yet Frelinghuysen looked like the more natural, intuitive painter, more trusting of the expressive possibilities of her materials than her (apparently) more cerebral husband. Morris, while in many ways the more ambitious artist of the two, often seemed hamstrung by theory or at least by a program, even, at times, worried that what he had done wasn't quite artful or finished enough.

It was plain that Morris aimed not at the "arbitrary" geometry Stuart Davis complained of, but at an amalgam of specifically "American" images and Cubist-inspired geometric construction, often within a fairly conventional space. Indians, New England architecture, church interiors, cityscapes, and the like flicker across his canvases throughout his career. The first in a series of Indian theme pictures and the earliest painting in the show, *Battle of Indians* (1929, George L. K. Morris and Suzy Frelinghuysen Foundation), was made soon after Morris's initial studies with Léger at the Académie Moderne. According to the catalogue's quotations from Morris's notes, he consciously obeyed the French master's directive to scatter figures across the picture plane instead of planting them in naturalistic space, but the long, narrow painting evokes Renaissance *cassone* panels more strongly than it does twentieth-century prototypes; Piero di Cosimo comes to mind before Léger. Léger's influence soon became more visible in Morris's work, but he remained attached to his Indian subject matter, manifested by floating feathers and schematic faces reminiscent of Kachina masks, in spite of evidence that he might have been better off without it. He even adapted the angular

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shorthand he devised for Native American references for his wartime images of the mid-Forties—with unfortunate results—populating otherwise inventively constructed, delicately colored French street scenes with spiky, cartoon-like soldiers in violent action.

Morris's attachment to a kind of narrative may have been problematic, but questions of scale and space challenged him still more. He kept trying to cram large chunks of his surroundings onto small canvases, translating the complexity of his subjects into more and more intricate subdivisions of planes, with a resulting diminution of scale. At worst, his pictures became obsessive assemblies of a multitude of tight little incidents, but when he scaled up and constructed his pictures of broad, generous planes, as he did in a series of large murals for the entrance hall and living room of his International Style house in Lenox, Massachusetts, he achieved some of his best works. (Alas, he reverted to Indian themes in a long mural in a passage connecting house and garage.)

Similarly, Morris's large-scale canvases are often his finest paintings. The "proto-Gottlieb" I liked so much in the 1983 Carnegie exhibition, *Mural Composition* (1940, The Whatley Collection, Austin, Texas), with its subtly modulated geometric background and bold, expansive drawing, looked splendid in the Williams show, as did the Whitney Museum's *Nautical Composition* (1937-42), despite its being somewhat more fragmented and tidily finished. Space breaks open in these pictures; planes float parallel to the surface of the canvas and confront the viewer without any lingering echo of conventional spatial rendering, of the miniaturized stage-set conception evident in other works. With its rich, earthy palette, *Nautical Composition* served, like *Mural Composition*, as a standard by which to measure Morris's real achievement.

The catalogue reveals that Morris was only too aware of his tendency to over-finish his pictures, to subdivide, tighten, and jam them. Frelinghuysen, it seems, frequently urged her husband to loosen up and let some air into his paintings, but even the brief passages quoted from Morris's notebooks demonstrate that while he agonized over her advice, he was unable to accept it wholly, adhering as he did to a rather rigid set of precepts of order, clarity, and finish.

Frelinghuysen seems to have had no such inhibitions. In a much quoted statement, she avowed that she worked intuitively "to make something I liked the look of." Seeing her work in the context of her collection made it clear that what she "liked the look of" particularly included the paintings by Braque, Gris, and Hélion that she saw almost daily. It was obvious that she learned a great deal from these first-hand encounters, absorbing lessons of scale, structure, surface, and color, and repeating them in a voice of her own. It was relatively easy to see how closely she had looked at her marvelous 1912 Braque, a tenuous accumulation of painted and sand-encrusted planes whose play of illusory transparency and gritty texture seems to have influenced her own experiments with varied surfaces. A tough, horizontal 1917 Gris, with its sheet music and guitar, is reflected in the structure and subject of Frelinghuysen's compositions, and the seductive lemon yellows and cool blue-grays of a sleek 1933 Hélion may have influenced her palette, but it takes nothing away from Frelinghuysen's accomplishment to note this. She was intelligent enough to choose outstanding mentors and wise enough to pay attention to what they had to offer.

Frelinghuysen thoroughly understood what the Cubists had to teach her about scale, realizing how dealing with still-life objects at actual size subverted questions of rendering and depiction, and substituted instead problems of constructing an "alternative reality" in new materials. She grasped, too, the implications of the Cubists' tipped and flattened space. Frelinghuysen's compositions rise up and face the viewer, with planes trued and faired to the surface of the canvas rather than being allowed to recede into fictive space.

The question of originality looms, of course, since Frelinghuysen's paintings,

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good as they are, are undeniably derivative and executed long after Cubism—as opposed to a Cubist conception of space—was a radical new idea. Yet the firm but relaxed structure, the subtle play of texture, the inventiveness of touch, and the unexpectedness of color in Frelinghuysen's work force us to take it seriously and to admire it.

The catalogue essay by Debra Bricker Balken—Deborah Menaker Rothschild's is more informative and straightforward—makes much of Morris's quarrel with Clement Greenberg's enthusiasm for Abstract Expressionism and Morris's discomfort and anger, through the Forties and Fifties, with the recognition accorded the artists that Greenberg praised. The apparent irrationality of Abstract Expressionism displeased Morris—it violated his most cherished principles of what painting could be—yet Miss Balken's emphasis on his conflict with Greenberg seems born more of modish concern for distancing herself from Formalist thinking than of real necessity. Modishness pervades much of her essay. Morris and Frelinghuysen are perceived as "marginalized" artists. In her conclusion, Miss Balken states:

> The lives and work of Suzy Frelinghuysen and George L. K. Morris present an intriguing case history. With recent rethinking on the nature of modernism, which has attempted to dismantle canonical notions of originality and authorship, their work gains renewed currency. Although devoid of the contemporary interest in undermining the ideological structure of modernism, their reworking of a cubist aesthetic nevertheless engages in issues of appropriation and the copy.

Morris and Frelinghuysen, who were devout believers in the significance of Modernism at a time when such belief was charged with idealism and optimism, and when Duchampian cynicism seemed a minor aberration, would no doubt be astonished by Miss Balken's interpretation of their work. Yet even if revisionism prompted the exhibition at Williams, the show itself makes it absurd to complain. There hasn't been a comprehensive study of American Cubism in many years, and I am grateful for the opportunity to see the work of two major practitioners in some depth, all the more so because I can see it in relation to the art their discerning eyes chose to live with.

Publisher's note: Back issues of *The New Criterion* are for sale at $6 each. A list of highlights is available on request from the Office Manager.

We are also pleased to announce the publication of an Index to the first ten years of *The New Criterion*, September 1982-June 1992. The Index is available for $12.50 a copy.

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Theater

Aeschylus in Brooklyn

by Donald Lyons

Ariane Mnouchkine, the guiding spirit of Paris's Théâtre du Soleil, brought the four plays she calls *Les Atrides*—Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* and Aeschylus's trilogy, the *Oresteia*—to the Park Slope Armory, a vast brick barn of 1895 near the southwest corner of Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Inside the dark armory, she sought to re-create the numinous atmosphere so powerfully achieved at her home base at the Cartoucherie, a Napoleonic arms factory in the Parc de Vincennes. Players made up in a netted but open space. The stage itself was a great, bare, three-sided arena of unpainted white wood; atop it to stage left was a long, blue-netted cage in which Jean-Jacques Lemêtre made his sustaining live music of angry percussion and softer lyre and flute. The audience sat on a rising bank of tin chairs (something like a high-school basketball game). Seating was unreserved. Between plays, one could leave the armory to patronize a restaurant in the gentrifying neighborhood or buy food inside to eat on dimly lit picnic benches. Access to the outdoors was at all times easy. These mild rigors much outraged and discombobulated the local critical elite, and many notices were largely occupied with whining and pouting about indignities suffered. If Mnouchkine accomplished nothing else worthwhile, she at least gave these pampered scribes a dose of artistic populism in action.

But on the whole the transplant of *Geist* from Paris to Park Slope worked. The *Iphigenia* I have already reviewed from Paris;[1] its effect, of powerful emotions at cross-purposes, held here. When at the end Iphigenia embraces her own sacrificial death, she orders a paean, a dance of exultation, and she proceeds to lead the chorus in it. In the moving performance of the supple Nirupama Nityanandan, the young girl finds joy in immolating herself in the cause of Greek unity. She crawls atop the white-swathed eccyclema, the moving platform that is this time representing an altar, as a quickening wind blows across the stage—the wind that will end the becalming of the Greek ships at Aulis and carry them all the way to Troy and glory. Euripides ends his play, produced in 405 after his death and in the last dark (for Athens) days of the Peloponnesian War, with a report of Iphigenia's miraculous rescue, but Clytemnestra, her outraged mother, is not buying it and curls herself at the rear of the stage into a ball of anger.

Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (comprising *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, and *Eumenides*) is a much tougher proposition to stage. It is the only surviving Greek trilogy, three plays written in 458 as an organic unit (Sophocles' so-called Theban trilogy consists of plays composed years apart), and constitutes, after Homer, the supreme achievement of Greek poetry. Albin Lesky writes that it is "one of the highpoints of human achievement. There is nothing to compare with it, except per-

1 See "Euripides in Paris, Shakespeare in London," in *The New Criterion*, September 1991, pages 131-135.

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haps the sculpture of Michelangelo. Yet in its form the *Oresteia* by no means reaches the utmost fulfillment of the classic ideal. This great poem, with its cosmic scale, still has many features of the archaic style: but they are not worn as shackles—rather as badges of achieved mastery. The sculptures of the temple of Zeus at Olympia are nearly contemporary with the *Oresteia*; and the Apollo of the west pediment is closely akin to the Apollo of the *Eumenides*." Among the archaic features of the trilogy are the great, static blocks of choral song that recapitulate and agonizingly attempt to make sense of the near and the remote past and worry about the future and try to fathom the overall will of Zeus. Present action is rare and stark. The dramaturgy is ponderous and repetitious, as themes are played once in a lyric and then in a logical key. And the language—the dense, clotted language of Aeschylus can be compared to little in English save late Shakespeare or perhaps Hopkins; his mind and imagination feverishly braid ropes of image and topic. To the honor of Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil, they keep passionately close to every word of Aeschylus; they omit, modernize, or speed up nothing (which was, alas, more than could be said for the lackadaisical English piped through the headphones in Brooklyn). It took a fierce, eccentric, introverted, spiritually cohesive outfit like Mnouchkine's to persevere in its imaginative voyage through the Aeschylean text and to make it so powerfully live, to make it indeed the theatrical experience of a lifetime. For their pains, of course, *Les Atrides* was called dull and overly expository. One critic picked on the lengthy choral preludes; another said the whole thing should have been at least halved. To make similar suggestions, except in a satirical spirit, about *Hamlet* or the *Ring* Cycle or the Sistine ceiling, would be a sign of what Russians call being *nekulturny*. But a fog of ignorant respect shrouds Aeschylus, a fog savagely dispelled by the Soleil. All of which is not to say that fidelity to Aeschylus precluded the Soleil from putting their own spin on things; only in submission is real freedom possible.

The *Agamemnon* opens ten years after the *Iphigenia*, in Argos, Agamemnon's capital, just as the long Trojan war is ending. It has the only male chorus of the four plays; they are elders of Argos, feeble geezers worried about everything and dressed in red, Beefeater garb (the personnel of the chorus, here and throughout, are men and women). The bounding, leaping ways of Soleil choruses are curtailed here as the old-timers, a bit arthritic, fill us in on the moral background to Agamemnon's imminent return: sweet Iphigenia, destructive Helen, the squalid and sanguinary horrors of life in the Trojan trenches. Clytemnestra (performed with authoritative but attractive plastique by the Brazilian dancer Juliana Carneiro da Cunha), in white blouse and blue pants, explains the beacon system by which she has learned of the fall of Troy, pretends to exult in that event, and then revealingly goes on to imagine the atrocities committed in Troy by her husband's swaggering troops. If we've listened, our imaginations are crammed with the tangled rights and wrongs of the war just ending; sympathies are difficult to award. When the red-draped platform wheels on the returned Agamemnon, head peeping unsurely up, his wife executes a paean of welcome (we remember the fatal paean her daughter danced) and dances the platform forward by the main strength of her welcoming energy. She then persuades a reluctant Agamemnon to walk the purple carpet, symbol of wealth and hybris; she literally wraps him around her and deposits him on the exit ramp. But we are not done with the platform. It has another, hidden occupant, the captive Trojan concubine Cassandra, played by Nirupama Nityanandan wrapped up in a Japanese kimono. The Soleil style in general is a pastiche, a selection from various theatrical traditions—Cretan frescoes, kabuki, Meyerhold, Bakst's Ballets Russes, and, permeating all, the Indian *Kutiyattam* forms designed for the staging of Sanskrit texts and drawn on likewise by Peter Brook for his *Mahabharata*. The hybrid Soleil stylizations work because they have been filtered through a unifying sensibility and because

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that sensibility serves Aeschylus. They project the awful strangeness, the frightening otherness of the plays as no toga-and-column classic or dinner-jacket modern possibly could.

Clytemnestra leaves the arena to complete her welcome indoors. Seer Cassandra, alone with the chorus, whirls about in an epileptic fit and takes us, in memory's eye, even further back in this terrible family to the time when Agamemnon's father, Atreus, stung at the seduction of his wife by his brother Thyestes, served Thyestes three of his children to eat—only one son, Aegisthus, escaped Atreus's plot for revenge. Cassandra also laments her own cold exploitation by that odd god, Apollo, "the wolf." She enters the palace to perish. Darkness during the murders. The chorus timorously dithers. Clytemnestra, in red top and black pants (Mnouchkine uses a very limited palette), lugs onstage on a sort of futon the guts of Agamemnon and Cassandra and kneels by them waving her reddened hands. The elders, perched around and above the arena, judge and harass her; she lunges futilely at them with her dripping knife. Enter her lover, Aegisthus, who turns the futon so that the heads face the audience; he squats and smirks and, baited as a "woman" by the chorus, runs after them in a shrill rage. It is Clytemnestra who must cuddle her piqued minion and subdue him and effect a standoff between the elders openly denouncing the new "tyrants" and Aegisthus. She is trying, as the play closes, to position herself as a transcending peacemaker.

It has escaped few of Mnouchkine's critics that *Les Atrides* has a feminist slant. For one thing, in the first two plays the male figures are given white facial makeup to simulate the frozen caricature of a mask. In the *Iphigenia*, Simon Abkarian's feckless Agamemnon veered from indecision to stoniness; Abkarian's Achilles in the same play was a cartoon of martial vanity. Both readings were, however, quite in Euripides' spirit. In the *Agamemnon*, Simon Abkarian's Agamemnon and Brontis Jodorowsky's Aegisthus were weak babies needing firm mothering from Clytemnestra. Da Cunha's Clytemnestra (in both plays) and Nirupama Nityanandan's Iphigenia and Cassandra kept their natural, mobile, sympathetic facial hues, unstylized by white. This stressed a note that was certainly present in Aeschylus, but Mnouchkine and da Cunha can be legitimately criticized for a certain sentimentalizing of Clytemnestra; the wounded mother is overstressed at the expense of Aeschylus's lioness. I was eager, then, to see if Orestes, the central and male figure of the next play, the *Libation Bearers*, would be caricatured. The title *Libation Bearers* refers to the chorus of foreign slave women who have been ordered by Clytemnestra to bring apotropaic offerings to the grave of the husband she killed. The queen is edgy because of a dream in which she gave birth to a snake that, suckling, slew her. It was a portent of Orestes. And the returning Orestes, who dominates this play, is neither posturing buffoon nor conscienceless assassin but a noble youth pushed by the grisly threats of the imperious Apollo to avenge his father on his mother. Simon Abkarian opened the play peering over the wall at his father's offstage tomb. He laid a long lock of black hair over the wall (this is a many-pony-tailed company); he is not in white paint; he wears black-and-white clothing; he is a human being. His sister Electra enters in starker black; she is more single-mindedly devoted to vengeance. The two recognize each other through the tokens of hair and footprint; they commence an angular, almost ugly dance of grief for their father. Orestes, conflicted by the daunting task before him, totters and falls. Electra would pick him up, as women do men in this staging, but she is restrained by the chorus leader (played by the remarkable dancer and actress Catherine Schaub, who serves the same function in all four plays). Orestes rights himself. Brother and sister and chorus leader crouch center stage for the long *kommos*, an ecstatic dirge in which they luridly imagine their father's slaying and work up their emotions of hatred for their mother and her lover. At the frenzied climax

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of the *kommos*, as the three singers plead to the dead in Hades for help, the platform eerily glides on. All in white, it is the tomb of Agamemnon. The two children touch it, draw energy from it, kneel symmetrically on it like statued angels in mourning.

Orestes is now ready to face his mother, who pleads for her life and tries to justify what she did. At last, she flees around the arena like a trapped beast. Her son, fortified by a mention of Apollo, has to chase and grab and drag her onto the ramp. It is a painful scene. Afterwards, Orestes, reproducing his mother's action in the *Agamemnon*, lugs on a pair of dead illicit lovers—this time, his mother and Aegisthus. He does a short victory dance, only to be wracked and driven to distraction by the barking of his mother's (so far invisible) avenging canine Furies. He runs off to the temple of his patron and coconspirator Apollo, leaving Electra to try to remove the bodies. She is not strong enough; they weigh, this time, too much; it takes the whole black-clad chorus to move them as darkness falls and the barking swells.

Simon Abkarian's amazing Orestes is the jewel in the crown of *Les Atrides*. He moves with the passionate plangency of an Ib Anderson in *The Prodigal Son* and yet has the brave swagger of Olivier's Othello. Incarnating the style of the company, he can switch from virile bounding to effeminate mockery (of Aegisthus). When Abkarian buckles in repugnant anguish, our hearts go out to the unwilling killer (as, to be fair, was his father when he slew Iphigenia), but his very unwillingness to kill is the hope for the future. Orestes is, however, less a character in the psychological sense that would come to birth in the plays of Aeschylus's successor, Sophocles, than he is a vector of forces. He is the point at which the conflicting wills of Apollo, Agamemnon, Electra, Clytemnestra, and the Furies meet. As a dessert to his sublime Orestes, Abkarian also, in the *Libation Bearers*, impersonates, in a delightful turn, Orestes' old nanny, who waddles garrulously on at one point ostensibly to play a minor role in the assassination plot but really to remind us that it was she, and not Clytemnestra, who really mothered and changed and fed the infant Orestes. (It is a characteristic of Aeschylus's archaic style that the comic coarseness of the nanny can consort with so much dense abstraction elsewhere; both notes are absent from the smoothly classical Sophocles.)

As the *Eumenides* opens, an anonymous line of "women in mourning" (in the garb of Mrs. Kennedy in mourning) patrol the front edge of the stage, which represents the temple of Apollo at Delphi, present refuge of Orestes; they are there, it later becomes clear, to keep the Furies (also, and later, known as the "kindly" Eumenides) in check, to keep them, as it were, from the audience. The Furies are sleeping dogs who need to be roused and egged on by the ghost of Clytemnestra, hot for the destruction of her son. "You've let him leap away like a fawn, like a dream," she snarls. The monsters stir; they are half-dog, half-ape, jumping on all fours, prehuman embodiments of blood ties and angry unforgettingness. Poor Orestes is a ragged beggar, a suppliant. The cosmic battle is for his life; atop one pinnacle of the surrounding stage wall his mother's ghost sics her curs; atop the opposite pinnacle a preening, sleek, white-garbed Apollo brandishes a golden bow, vowing to protect Orestes and drive the filthy Furies from his clean fane. They will not go. Standoff. Change of venue: the case must be decided in Athens, whose patron goddess Athena will render a verdict acceptable to both sides.

In Athens, the platform brings on Athena (da Cunha, in gleaming white), who must become the transcending peacemaker that Iphigenia and Clytemnestra had imperfectly aspired to be. As preliminary judge, she attends to both sides, running earnestly from desperate Orestes to sputtering Spokesfury. But she finds the whole matter too tough to be resolved by her say-so alone, for, should the Furies lose and Orestes go free, they will remain to infect and poison her land of Athens. Determining to make the judicial act the act not of one being but of the whole society, Athena inaugurates a jury of Athe-

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nian citizens and decrees that it henceforth settle blood cases. Once again, both sides present their views: the Furies in a lyrical mode of rage and threat; Apollo in a logical mode of frigid reason (he "proves" that only the father is a true parent and that thus matricide is nothing grave). Both excited song and arid logos are partial and dangerously incomplete; a harmonizing medium is necessary. The jury ties, 6-6; Athena breaks the tie in Orestes' favor, citing her motherless state as a deciding factor. Orestes (Abkarian still) gingerly regains an upright, unbeggarly stature and proclaims, in gratitude for his deliverance at Athens, an eternal alliance between Athens and his own Argos. That is, he speaks in his official kingly role and not as a cleansed individual who has suffered. The play has now transcended individuality; the arena is cosmic. From the departure of Orestes until the end of the play, Athena tries to gentle the only-half-accepting Furies with promises of honor in her city; indeed, she sees the importance of holding on to some of what they represent: the rooted sanctities of nature and family and civic life; the holiness of the heart's affections; ancestral voices. They are a needed counterbalance to the Apollonian rationalities that would quantify and drain life. Camille Paglia's view of the *Oresteia* as an Apollonian triumph over Dionysian forces is thus too simple and antithetical; the trilogy rather envisages a synthesis of the two by Athena. John H. Finley, Jr., has a richer perspective: "In retrospect, Agamemnon's crime against Iphigenia appears as an inner contradiction in bygone society where kingship, founded on family, must assert itself by violating family. Further, the public goals of society were corrupted for private ends, and Menelaus' loss was no worthy cause for the death of fighting men. . . . Agamemnon's huge vitality . . . contained an inovating force of masculine will and mind which was capable at once of extending and violating the ancient limits. Clytemnestra, rooted in these limits, has a vigor proportionate to her husband's because she must, if she is to protect her competing right. Each of the two positions is forced to tragic and guilty overstatement. . . . Agamemnon and Clytemnestra survive amended in Orestes, whose healing is the sight of the divine radiance."

At the end of the play, in an unforgettable image, Athena raises her arm (it is an Apollonian posture) in a gesture at once restraining and vivifying toward a Fury who has begun to walk erect, to be perhaps human. Bestial and divine stand in equipoise in the act of creating a human civilization. Athena and her Athens must—in the view of Aeschylus in 458, the high noon of Athenian glory before the Pelopponesian War—reconcile mind and blood, female and male, earth and sky in a democratic harmony.

Last month's exchange of letters in *The New Criterion* on the Yugoslav tragedy sounded some very Aeschylean notes. One correspondent claimed that "the present generation of Croats had no blood on its hands"; the other rejected this concentration "on the level of *individual* responsibility" as a misplaced "attempt to define the limits of memory." One cited the sins of X today; the other the sins of Y yesterday; it seemed a never-ending cycle of blame and reprisal. I adduce this only to show how profound, terrible, and enduring were the passions that Aeschylus struggled to shape into art. Art, if it is anything, is a struggle toward a fuller humanity, and it is the peculiar power of both this playwright and this audacious production to have made us more deeply see that.

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Books

Acne on the Left, lepers on the Right

by John Silber

Titles sometimes boomerang on their authors, betraying them through unintended irony. Lillian Hellman's *Scoundrel Time* is a case in point; *Politics by Other Means* is another.[1] The thesis of David Bromwich's book—which might have been called *A Plague on Both Your Houses*—is that all the combatants in the ongoing culture wars are motivated by politics.

Professor Bromwich diagnoses conservative defenders of tradition such as George Will and William J. Bennett as Republicans, Reaganites, and lackeys of the corporations. But he is also hard on the academic Left, which he subjects to a detailed and acerbic critique.

This is not to say that he is even-handed. In discussing the faults of the institutional radicals, Bromwich is largely impersonal, dealing by and large with the sins rather than the sinners. This is all to the good, for the argument *ad hominem* was discredited long ago by the classical logicians and rhetoricians, and too much analysis of literary theory has been contaminated by discussions of Stanley Fish's tastes in cars and clothes. Discussing the Left, Bromwich is happily free of these vices. But when he takes on what he sees as the politicization of the conservatives, he resorts to highly personalized tactics. He bears down hard on two figures, George Will and William J. Bennett. In his attack on them Bromwich flirts constantly with the *ad hominem*.

Bromwich begins his dissection of Will with an exposé. Most people, he says, think that Will's political beliefs were formed in reaction to the political turmoil of the late 1960s and 1970s. Not so, says Bromwich: read Will's 1968 doctoral dissertation and you will discover that he thought that way even as a young man. Reasonable people will find it to Will's credit that his principles are grounded in something more than counterpunching with the headlines. But not Bromwich, who suggests that Will, like Macaulay as described by Bagehot, has "an inexperiencing nature." The best he can say for Will is that, like many political commentators, "he waited for his moment, and with Ronald Reagan's election his moment came." Will, he says, is an opportunist.

This analysis is almost entirely *ad hominem*. But the soundness of Will's ideas, whether great, moderate, or nonexistent, does not depend on how he developed them. He might have been born with them, attained them by a life of study, or had them thrust upon him in a blinding flash on the road to some Damascus. The answer may interest his biographers, but it is irrelevant to the truth of what he says.

This is not Bromwich's only use of *ad hominem* arguments. In a passage worth quoting at length, he says that Will

1 *Politics by Other Means: Higher Education & Group Thinking*, by David Bromwich; Yale University Press, 257 pages, $30.

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> has sometimes appeared to flout even the decorum that urges a temporary silence in the face of public embarrassment. He published, for example, in March 1979, in the week before Three Mile Island, a resonant endorsement of the whole nuclear industry, a bill of health so comprehensive as to leave its critics on a par with believers in miasma, witchcraft, and other precivilized phantasms of pollution anxiety. Understandably, he does not reprint that column in *The Pursuit of Virtue*; but he does, oddly, reprint the self-vindication that he published a few weeks later, when the worst possible short-term disaster had been averted. "Events," Will reported, "have not contradicted most of what was said here about nuclear safety. . . . The record of commercial reactors remains what it was: no one has been killed and public-health damage, if any, is unmeasured." Was this after all the voice of prudence? Or was it rather a reflex sentiment of commercial optimism, in the service of a corporate good which the genius of public relations has lately captured with the phrase *damage control*?

It is understandable, as Bromwich might put it, that he does not quote from Will's first column, which appeared in the April 2, 1979, issue of *Newsweek*. Had he done so, it would have been evident that he is misrepresenting Will's topic: the column is primarily a census of factual errors in Jane Fonda's film *The China Syndrome*, its restrained tone belied by Bromwich's sarcastic summary about miasmas and witchcraft. Moreover, if Bromwich had listed the errors, he would have had to show how Will was mistaken. This would have been very difficult, because Will was correct in saying that the accident at Three Mile Island did not contradict what he had said about nuclear power just before the accident happened.

But Bromwich does not trouble to argue the merits and demerits of nuclear power. He simply relies on groupthink—most intellectuals, without giving much thought to nuclear power, know that it is a Bad Thing. It is as if Will believes the earth is flat, or that Hitler was a constructive statesman. These are self-discrediting positions, for everyone knows that they are wrong. The same reliance on What Everyone Knows leads Bromwich to claim without argument that Will's alleged "self-vindication" has no basis in fact.

Bromwich finds William Bennett even worse than Will: "Bennett is the less skillful writer of the two, as well as the less agile thinker." He finds virtues in this latter deficiency, because "[Bennett] often brings to light, by stating quite unguardedly, assumptions that Will has taken care to hold in reserve."

Bromwich's caricature of Bennett's views cannot survive exposure to the views themselves: ". . . he appears to agree at every point with Will's stress on the need to propagate a traditional culture closed to criticism." This passage, equally unfair to Will, illuminates the Manichaeism that informs Bromwich's critique. Because both Will and Bennett have objected to certain criticisms of traditional culture, Bromwich concludes it must follow that they would prevent its criticism.

Bromwich's animus toward Bennett takes him to repellent depths of innuendo:

> Bennett went on to characterize the adversarial culture in a manner that most prudent conservatives have avoided since the anti-Semitic campaigns of Europe in the 1930s. He compared its agents to a kind of virus: "Most Americans, of course, reject the perverted culture of our adversaries. . . . Our common culture serves as a sort of immunological system, destroying the values and attitudes promulgated by our adversaries before they can infect our body politic."

The innuendo here is double: we all know, Bromwich implies, that conservatives are anti-Semites under the skin. While the prudent ones manage to conceal the fact, Bennett, whom Bromwich has called an unskillful writer, exposes dark sides that his more clever colleagues keep hidden.

In a footnote Bromwich says of higher education when Bennett was Secretary of Education that it was "a time of the dismantling of the national program of university scholarships, reduced federal support for

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secondary education, and falling academic performance on national examinations." Only the last of these claims is true. Between 1985 and 1989 federal support for elementary and secondary education rose from $4.4 billion to $6.11 billion. Support for the "dismantled" system of federal grants to college students went from $4.4 billion to $5.1 billion. (Total federal expenditure on financial aid rose from $8.9 to $10.4 billion.) I do not believe Professor Bromwich deliberately fabricated his charges. He was probably guilty of nothing more than repeating the duckspeak to which academics are prone on this topic.

Despite such passages, it would be unfair to characterize *Politics by Other Means* as a mere partisan hatchet job. Professor Bromwich's critique of an academy in decline from left-wing activists is original and nuanced. He astutely identifies as a loyalty oath a requirement—which he reports as in force at Clark University—that course proposals include an analysis of their "pluralistic" content. He provides an exemplary account of the malign influence exercised by those who claim to professionalize literary studies. But the book is defaced by his treatment of Will and Bennett: not by his disagreements with them, but by the animus that informs his account of those disagreements.

An even stronger animus informs his treatment of another figure, the fortieth president of the United States. One might have supposed that Ronald Reagan would be a peripheral figure in a study of higher education, but he is central to Bromwich's analysis. For example, according to Bromwich, Reagan was responsible for the decline in the humanities:

> Others have argued that American society does not itself encourage further study of the humanities, and that the problem itself is daily exhibited at the highest levels of presidential government. *You can get this far without knowing anything* [emphasis in original], was the message sent to millions of viewers by the ignorant old charmer himself. It was stamped on their minds by every improvised word he spoke and every stupefied answer he made in reply to an honest question.

This passage may seem hyperbolic, but not when compared to Bromwich's summation of Reagan's place in intellectual history:

> The greatest of all modernizers, the unexampled master and servant of images, the destroyer of the past and the effortless deformer of memory: these are the terms in which he will be remembered, if a culture markedly different from his survives to remember at all. From such a future perspective, the motives, as well as the judgment, of men like George Will and William Bennett will be difficult to recover or imagine.

That Will should support such a man and that Bennett should have joined his cabinet is, for Bromwich, ample evidence of their intellectual and moral corruption.

There is no limit to the malign influence of Bromwich's demonized Reagan. According to him, the institutional radicals—the best known of which are the literary theorists usually (and carelessly) lumped together as "deconstructionists"— are not, as one might have supposed, driven by Marxism. They too are Reaganites:

> It would be a mistake to regard President Reagan's great work—the education of a whole society down to his level—as having affected the mind and habits of just one class or one political side. . . . Outwardly hostile to everything he stood for, the academic culture of the left did not fail to extract every possible comfort from his message. [Reagan] also taught by example . . . day after day without blame, a president who had at his command not a fact of history more than two weeks old. The theorists of literature who suppose that today is the first day of the year zero are among his most faithful disciples.

The degeneracies of literary theory, as Bromwich must understand when he calms down, proceed from intellectual springs far

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older than the Reagan administration. Academics have been prone to faddishness since the days of the Sophists. And the contemporary translation of French intellectual Marxism into the American academy is just what one would expect in a country where Marxism, by being ineluctably denied political power but allowed full expression, is set free to fester in ways that are denied it in Marxist states where as a state dogma it becomes the property of party ideologists supported by the secret police.

One would think Bromwich were joking here were it not for the violence of his contempt for Reagan elsewhere, which reaches a level of hyperbole that the most imprudent Democratic office-seekers would deny themselves on the stump. This contempt does not, of course, in itself invalidate anything Bromwich says. But it does demonstrate his own susceptibility to politics; it cannot be used as evidence that Will and Bennett, whose views of Reagan were shared by enough Americans to put him twice in the White House, are reactionary extremists.

Considered superficially, *Politics by Other Means* is an analysis of the corrupting influence of politics *per se* upon intellectuals of all stripes, Bromwich only excepted. But Professor Bromwich's conclusion forbids this reading. It is not politics *per se* but the politics of Ronald Reagan that corrupt. In his concluding paragraph, he characterizes our recent political life as the lengthened shadow of Ronald Reagan:

> The experiment of allowing politicians to educate us down to their level has been tried. On the whole, it has worked out badly. . . . There will be no end of the unreal politics of the academy until we have again a real politics outside the academy. It cannot come too soon.

The unreal politics to which Professor Bromwich opposes his hoped-for real politics are, however, the *real* politics which elected Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Although few would agree with Professor Bromwich's demonic vision of Ronald Reagan, he is hardly unique, especially in the academy, in finding these two presidents unsatisfactory. But he is without example in his belief, worthy of Chicken Little, that the very existence of higher education is threatened by a political system in which they can be elected.

Professor Bromwich's special pleading takes a subtle and original form. In order to gain the ethical proof required to carry his argument that Will and Bennett are lepers, he concedes that there is a certain amount of acne on the Left. And this too is politics by other means.

Decline & fall

Martin Stannard Evelyn Waugh: The Later Years, 1939-1966. Norton, 523 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Brooke Allen

With the completion of this two-volume biography, Martin Stannard has made an invaluable contribution to English letters. Biographical material on Evelyn Waugh is plentiful—memoirs by his family members, army acquaintances, country neighbors, and Oxford contemporaries deal with Waugh to a greater or lesser extent, and his friend Christopher Sykes published a full-length study in 1975—but until now there has been no first-rate and inclusive biography. Sykes's book, *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography*, is, though serious and well documented, too evidently the work of a co-religionist and a sycophant to make a convincing portrayal. It is also painfully dull, a fault inexcusable in the biography of an artist whose interest to posterity lies, above all, in his outrageous, often offensive, humor.

The virtue of Stannard's biography is the author's apparent detachment—difficult to maintain when dealing with a subject who has, both during his life and beyond it, consistently provoked both ire and adulation. One hesitates to employ the frequently misused term "objectivity," but in this case

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there seems no better word, for though Stannard paints Waugh's portrait with sympathy, the warts are treated as painstakingly as are the man's finer features. The author displays no partisanship; he ventures little in the way of artistic judgment upon Waugh's work, and his treatment of his subject's religion is so balanced that it is impossible to tell whether Stannard is himself a Catholic.

All this being said, however, it must also be admitted that this book, too, is on occasion dull, in sad contrast with the delightful first volume.[1] This is not entirely the author's fault, for this volume, unlike the first, tells an often dreary story. Until his death Waugh maintained a vigorous public bluster, manifested in irate letters to the newspapers, libel suits against the Beaverbrook press, and spirited attacks upon Picasso, Vatican II, and other specimens of modern degeneracy. The bluster, however, masked the deep unhappiness of his later years, now revealed by Stannard. The story of Waugh's last two decades is an almost unrelieved chronicle of failure, depression, financial difficulties, and, saddest of all, declining artistic powers.

At the age of thirty-six (where this volume begins), Waugh had already completed the bulk of his best work, enjoyed the last of his "adventurous" travels, and begun the long descent into *accidie* that was to characterize the rest of his life. At forty-six he was an old man, physically feeble, intermittently tortured by persecution mania and by white-hot flashes of rage against the rest of the world. During the war, he said, he had stopped thinking people were funny, and the loss of this greatest of life's consolations marked also the beginning of his loss of talent.

The last of Waugh's books in his fully lighthearted vein, *Put Out More Flags*, was written during the early part of the war. It is generally considered somewhat lightweight, but, even if it is not Waugh at his very best, it contains a great deal of top-notch comic material. It is telling that at the time of writing Waugh considered the book a potboiler, investing much more labor and hope in *Work Suspended*, an autobiographical novel (never completed) in a new, more serious, "richer" style. *Work Suspended* is the first of Waugh's attempts to escape from his comic typecasting into the role of serious novelist. Stannard, as always deferential to Waugh's often wrongheaded appraisals of his own work, calls the fragment one of "extraordinary literary power"; it is in fact a slight, frail thing, elegantly written (like all of Waugh's work) but self-conscious and affectedly elegiac. His had always been a two-dimensional art, suitable to comedy; and, as E. M. Forster knew, "a serious or tragic flat character is apt to be a bore." Both in style and substance, unfortunately, *Work Suspended* indicated the direction his work was in future to take.

Brideshead's faults, especially its sentimentality, are by now legendary; they were obvious even to Waugh when he reread the novel in 1950. *Edmund Campion*, his life of the Jesuit martyr, is a mediocre work of apologetics. *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* is interesting principally as biographical material and as a chronicle of mental illness; *Sword of Honour* a fine series of novels, though "good-tempered Waugh," as one critic wrote, "and therefore Waugh at his second best"; *A Tourist in Africa* a feeble follow-up to the exuberant prewar travel books; *Helena* intolerably twee. Of all his postwar work, only *The Loved One* shows Waugh at the height of his powers, and after that, as Stannard points out, "he never wrote another 'cruel' book. From this point his work represented a form of *pietas*."

For Waugh was painfully aware of each one of his faults: his sinfulness, his lack of charity, his never-diminishing distance from grace. His life represented an attempt to conquer his failings, and if he found it impossible to be himself the pattern of a Christian gentleman—"it was difficult to promote asceticism with a cigar in one hand and a glass of champagne in the other"—he could at least celebrate simplicity, asceticism, and

1 *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years, 1903-1939*, by Martin Stannard, was published by Norton in 1987 and is now available in paperback (537 pages, $10.95).

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humility in others. "Dimness" was to become, bizarrely, an ideal, and his new protagonists—Helena, Crouchback, Scott-King—reflected the dimness he valued but could never emulate. Dimness, of course, makes unnourishing literary fodder, and Waugh's artistic failures grew from his unsuccessful attempt to create for himself a specifically Christian literature. Graham Greene tried to dissuade him from this object, quoting Newman: "I say, . . . if Literature is to be made a study of human nature, you cannot have a Christian literature. It is a contradiction in terms to attempt the sinless literature of sinful man." Waugh, always far more idealistic than Greene, disagreed.

Combined with this abstract literary agenda was Waugh's deliberate withdrawal from the outer world. From early middle age he retreated into his own home and saw few people other than family and close friends. This was fatal to his art: he had always drawn directly on experience rather than on reflection. Fantastic as his work often seems, he was essentially a realistic artist. "His characters are drawn from life," wrote Gore Vidal, "sometimes still struggling as he pins them to the page." As his circle of acquaintance contracted, he lost access to the kind of rich material he had crammed with such profligacy into his early novels.

Waugh was only too aware that over the last twenty years of his life his imagination and talents were burning out. He was desperately worried, not so much for the sake of his own literary vanity as out of fear that he would not be able to continue supporting his large and expensive family. As his marketability continued to plummet, he accepted every offer, however demeaning, that his agent proposed: anything for quick cash. Widely considered a has-been, a relic of the past, Waugh feared bankruptcy throughout the latter part of his life, and this fear was not in fact unreasonable. With his reputation at its lowest, Waugh's fame was temporarily eclipsed by that of his son Auberon, still in his early twenties and a successful young novelist-about-town, and even by the success of his long-scorned brother Alec, who surprised everyone by suddenly writing his first best-seller in more than forty years, *Island in the Sun*. Added to this was Waugh's humiliation at being offered a mere CBE rather than the knighthood he coveted: "the death-blow," Stannard writes, "to a lifetime's social climbing."

All this makes painful reading, the more so since Waugh brought so many of his troubles upon himself. The list of those who had much to endure from him is a long one: his brother, his accountant, his agent, his publisher—not to mention his wife and children. It is interesting, though, that they did continue to endure, and to endure with affection; Waugh had the gift of inspiring loyalty and the wish to please in those around him. Certain of his friends—Cyril Connolly, Lady Diana Cooper, Randolph Churchill—continued to love him in spite of behavior that would have been unforgivable in anyone else. Waugh also retained their respect. Connolly, though cruelly lampooned in *Sword of Honour* as the frowsy editor Everard Spruce, later rose above his hurt feelings to call the trilogy "unquestionably the finest novel to come out of the war." Alec Waugh, after suffering countless insults and rebuffs from his brother, gently admonished their mother when she complained of Evelyn's high-handedness: Evelyn had brought great honor to the name of Waugh, he wrote. "The world is full of agreeably mannered people, but lamentably short of men of genius. We ought, I think, to be grateful and proud that he is what he is." Graham Greene, one of the few of Waugh's friends not to receive the vicious edge of his wit, thought Waugh the greatest novelist of his generation; Spender and Auden, who had suffered vitriolic public abuse from Waugh for decades, "admired him immensely," Spender wrote, "as a writer of genius."

There is nothing Waugh would have wished more than to be able to return the affection he continued to receive, in spite of everything, from those around him. But he was possessed by a devil of perversity, an instinct to hurt; was even, Stannard posits, a

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little mad. Though he lavished love on his daughter Margaret, he was seemingly unable to express any for Auberon, refusing to visit the boy as he lay on the brink of death for weeks following an army accident with a machine-gun. He was not even able to give himself fully to his chosen Faith, for "every attempt at loyal service had been stained by his egotism. The talents which distinguished him corrupted his spiritual exercises. His art was a theatre of cruelty; his temperament instinctively uncharitable." He longed for the consolation of group loyalties, but he despised group mentalities of every kind. Stannard puts it succinctly: "Waugh was always a solitary in search of a club."

Stannard omits (perhaps wisely since this has been done so often elsewhere) to offer final opinions on the relative merits of Waugh's books. He gives Waugh's own opinions, quotes the critics, and leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions, generously assuming a familiarity with the entire oeuvre. He thus sidesteps the unresolved argument that has been carried on for some forty years as to what, exactly, is Waugh's place in literary history. Are his later, serious works to be taken as more important than the early ones? Is he even to be taken seriously as an artist at all? The *TLS* review of *Pinfold* made a bold case:

> It is time people stopped treating Mr. Waugh as a failed Mauriac. He is a lightweight who has suffered from being bracketed with completely different writers like . . . Greene. . . . Like Sheridan or Fitzgerald or Max Beerbohm, [Waugh] has a freak talent and is entitled to be judged on what he writes without any attempt to relate him to trends or other writers or anything else.

Stannard takes exception to this evaluation, but there is much justice in it, and read without bias it is hardly insulting to Waugh himself. He did indeed have a freak talent, if by that one means that he had an extraordinary style quite unlike anything that has appeared before or since, and a brilliant, unprecedented gift for black comedy. Nor would Waugh scorn a place in the immortal company of Sheridan and Beerbohm, or see their work as in any way inferior to that of their heavier-hitting contemporaries. The writing (and all art) for which Waugh had always expressed the loudest admiration was unabashedly "minor," often patently artificial, decorative rather than "high." Among his own contemporaries he was most lavish in praise of writers who, like Ivy Compton-Burnett and Christopher Isherwood, kept their subject matter relatively narrow, the better to perfect their special techniques. When writing about Swift, Dickens, or James, Waugh was judicious and measured in his praise: but when he used the word "master," it was of Beerbohm and Wodehouse that he spoke.

This is not to say that Waugh did not take his role as artist seriously. In fact, he was throughout his career obsessively concerned with the nature of artistic creation, and many of his literary protagonists were artists of one kind or another, all in some way extensions of Waugh himself: Charles Ryder the architectural painter; John Plant the skillful detective-story writer; his father the out-of-date Academic painter; John Boot the fashionable novelist; William Boot the florid nature-writer; Adam Fenwick-Symes the gossip columnist; Mr. Joyboy the inspired embalmer; Gilbert Pinfold the meticulous craftsman; Dennis Barlow the Eliotic poet. Waugh was passionate about his vocation as an artist, although, refreshingly, he did not overestimate his own work.

Sad this biography certainly is; irritating, too, in that so many of Waugh's fantasies and bugbears soon become overwhelmingly tiresome; also tragic, in that so much of his career was wasted upon preoccupations unworthy of his mental powers. His criticisms of Connolly apply in equal measure to himself: ". . . a pagan addressing theological problems; a dandy hedonist turned eccentric don; a fat man with a thin man inside, struggling to get out; a skilful writer whose style unaccountably rotted with cheap sentiment." Finally, however, Waugh's was a triumphant life. The very painfulness of his spiritual struggle makes his efforts toward grace the more important. His was a great

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and idiosyncratic talent, which bore fruit in a handful of masterpieces. Like his idol P. G. Wodehouse, he created a unique world which will continue to bring pleasure to many future generations. He did as much to define the *Stimmung* of his era as anyone in this century. Stannard's biography, though often giving more details about Waugh's life than would interest anyone but a specialist, fully transmits this sense of triumph.

Twain's brevities

Louis J. Budd, editor
Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches & Essays.
Volume I: 1852-1890, 1,076 pages.
Volume II: 1891-1910, 1,050 pages.
The Library of America, $35 each; boxed set $70

reviewed by James W. Tuttleton

Late in life, responding to the adolescent Stark Young, Henry James made out a reading list of five of his own works of fiction. On the list he included no short stories—only novels. But he told Young to come back to him after he had read the novels. Then "you shall have your little tarts when you have eaten your beef and potatoes." The Library of America, now up to sixty-one volumes of classic American writing, has not presented us any of James's little tarts—although it *has* given us a number of volumes of James's novels, essays, and prefaces.

The Library has also given us some of Mark Twain's beef and potatoes: *The Innocents Abroad*, *Roughing It*, and the *Mississippi Writings*. But now, in their latest two-volume offering, the Library at last gives us the fullest collection ever published, in an authoritative edition, of the little tarts of Mark Twain—those sketches, tall tales, essays, stories, and even speeches that made him our most boisterous and irreverent national humorist. There is, of course, no substitute for his hilarious and often disturbing novels—among others *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), and *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). But anyone with an interest in these novels will find in the brevities of Samuel Langhorne Clemens a rich compendium of his observations on prospecting and politics, fashions and manners, medicine and journalism, seances and fortune-telling, popular and historical charlatans, Indians, female suffrage, royalty, barbers, dueling, temperance, copyright laws, postprandial oratory, the crime of injudicious swearing, the pleasures of tobacco, the science of onanism, and the decayed art of lying. In addition to these sketches, we find in the Library's collection such masterworks of short fiction as "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" (1865) and "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1899) and essays in criticism like "How to Tell a Story" (1895) and "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences" (1895). To read these more than 270 pieces—which amply fill more than 2,000 pages—is to observe the emergence of a brilliant artist from the youthful apprentice and to witness that gifted man declining into the blackest pessimism and rage against the universe. Of course there are dark strains in the early work and hilarity in the later: Clemens was nothing if not inconsistent.

No doubt there was method in his literary madness. In "How to Tell a Story," Clemens laid claim to a theory of national humor, according to which the best of our standup comedy and written humor—as illustrated by Artemus Ward, Bill Nye, and Dan Setchell—arises not from the *matter* of a tale but from *the manner of its telling*. This ordinarily involved the invention of an ingenuous persona who dramatizes a garrulous and disjointed tale in a grave manner, doing his best "to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it." The tale finishes with "a nub" or "snapper," but this is "inadvertently" dropped amidst so much irrelevancy that the narrator "does not know it is a nub" and when the "belated audience" presently catches the joke, the nar-

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rator looks up "with innocent surprise, as if wondering what they had found to laugh at." The best humorous tale is thus not merely funny but a delayed-reaction time-bomb, a hoax played on the beguiled and perhaps slow-witted audience, in which calculated pauses and split-second timing are essential. It was a method practiced first in the West, around prospector campfires and on courthouse lawns, where the tales grew tall and taller and were perfected and polished in the retelling. It is a method that very nearly every American humorist, from Petroleum V. Nasby to Jack Benny and Woody Allen, has exploited.

Certainly most of the hilarity of Clemens himself, who perfected the method, rises out of such an ingenuous invented personality—particularly that of his favorite *nom de plume*, Mark Twain. Clemens attained national celebrity in 1865 when the New York *Saturday Press* published his "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" (subsequently renamed "The Celebrated [or Notorious] Jumping Frog of Calaveras County"), a tale commonplace in the mining towns but perfected in Clemens's written narrative. Most readers nowadays are likely to remember it as merely the account of a practical joke played on the compulsive bettor Jim Smiley by the stranger who fills Smiley's frog, Dan'l Webster, with a double-handful of quail-shot so he can't jump in the contest. But the real genius of the tale is in the practical joke played on "Mark Twain" by "Artemus Ward" (Charles Farrar Browne), who supposedly urged Twain to ask old Simon Wheeler about the whereabouts of his friend the Rev. *Leonidas W.* Smiley. The name association leads the garrulous old Wheeler to launch into such a rambling but hilarious monologue—of which the jumping frog incident is but a part—that Twain cannot wait to escape. Jim Smiley, says Wheeler,

> . . . was the curiosest man about always betting on anything that turned up you ever see, if he could get anybody to bet on the other side, and if he couldn't he'd change sides—any way that suited the other man would suit *him*—any way just so's he got a bet, *he* was satisified. But still, he was lucky—uncommon lucky; he most always come out winner. He was always ready and laying for a chance; there couldn't be no solitry thing mentioned but what that feller'd offer to bet on it—and take any side you please, as I was just telling you: if there was a horse race, you'd find him flush or you find him busted at the end of it; if there was a dog-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a cat-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a chicken-fight, he'd bet on it; why if there was two birds setting on a fence, he would bet you which one would fly first . . .

This is rhythmic oral prose at its best; the syntactic play, the down-home syllabic elisions, the iterations and reiterations in the tale are those of a writer with a perfect ear who knows how to stylize the speaking voice.

In his prefatory letter to Ward, Twain writes:

> I have a lurking suspicion that your Leonidas W. Smiley is a myth—that you never knew such a personage, and that you only conjectured that if I asked old Wheeler about him it would remind him of his infamous *Jim* Smiley, and he would go to work and bore me nearly to death with some infernal reminiscence of him as long and tedious as it should be useless to me. If that was your design, Mr. Ward, it will gratify you to know that it succeeded.

As will be obvious to any reader of the tale, old Wheeler's monologue is pure perfection in its illiterate dialect, knee-slapping comedic exaggeration, and deadpan humor. Of course the joke on *this* "Twain" is that he never "gets" how funny Wheeler is, for he is—in *this* tale—too proper and gentlemanly to bear patiently an illiterate old yarn-spinner.

At the center of Twain's tales is always some kind of comic mendacity and the impulse to hoax the naïve—the dandy, the Easterner, the greenhorn, and the gullible. If he could take in, however momentarily, the whole nation, so much the better. As a newspaperman, Clemens used the reporter's reputation

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for fact to get the maximum credulity, as in this piece, headlined "Petrified Man," which appeared in the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise* for October 4, 1862, and was reprinted in various other newspapers. (It is worth remembering that the Petrified Forest had just recently been discovered in the West, and Easterners were agog with the news of ancient stone trees.)

> A petrified man was found some time ago in the mountains south of Gravelly Ford. Every limb and feature of the stony mummy was perfect, not even excepting the left leg, which has evidently been a wooden one during the lifetime of the owner—which lifetime, by the way, came to a close about a century ago, in the opinion of a savan who has examined the defunct. The body was in a sitting posture, and leaning against a huge mass of croppings; the attitude was pensive, the right thumb resting against the side of the nose; the left thumb partially supported the chin, the fore-finger pressing the inner corner of the left eye and drawing it partly open; the right eye was closed, and the fingers of the right hand spread apart. This strange freak of nature created a profound sensation in the vicinity, and our informant states that by request, Justice Sewell or Sowell, of Humboldt City, at once proceeded to the spot and held an inquest on the body. The verdict of the jury was that "deceased came to his death from protracted exposure," etc. The people of the neighborhood volunteered to bury the poor unfortunate, and were even anxious to do so; but it was discovered, when they attempted to remove him, that the water which had dripped upon him for ages from the crag above, had coursed down his back and deposited a limestone sediment under him which had glued him to the bed rock upon which he sat, as with a cement of adamant, and Judge S. refused to allow the charitable citizens to blast him from his position. The opinion expressed by his Honor that such a course would be little less than sacrilege, was eminently just and proper. Everybody goes to see the stone man, as many as three hundred having visited the hardened creature during the past five or six weeks.

This "Mark Twain" is earnest in his objectivity, detailed in his reportage, and scrupulous in the precision aimed for in the "facts" of the case. The style is that of a reporter who has done his interview legwork and can be morally solemn, appropriately judicial, and fittingly elevated in diction. Of course the preposterousness of the whole business—especially the notion of blasting free the stone man with the wooden leg—might alert the attentive Eastern reader. But in the age of Darwin's fossils and the rip-roaring West, who could be sure?

As Clemens developed this persona of "Mark Twain," the character took on more and more of the illiterate dialect, Western irreverence, moral slipperiness, and garrulous mendacity of old Simon Wheeler. Clemens was always at his best, it seems to me, when he allowed free imaginative play to the comic and satiric possibilities arising out of his character's ignorance, pretension, artful but obvious lying, and mental eccentricity. He was in his element with an elaborated burlesque or farce, for, as he once wrote, nothing can stand against the "assault of laughter." He could also toss off choice one-liners, as in "Mark's Maxims," of which these, from the Library edition, are exemplary: "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence in society." And "It is the foreign element that commits our crimes. There is no native criminal class except Congress." And "The trouble ain't that there is too many fools, but that the lightning ain't distributed right."

Psychiatrists are fond of telling us that all humor is really a sublimated form of aggression and that "making fun of" masks the displaced anger of a disappointed idealist. Certainly as Clemens grew up with the country, he became more irked with and outraged by what he saw about him. In his case, the anger surfaces intermittently in the early years but becomes the dominant ground-bass at the end. In this election year it is worth remembering that he lived through one of the more venal eras in American politics, and he warmed with relish to the exposure of elec-

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tions bought by business interests, legislators on the corporation payroll, and courts in the hip pocket of the plutocrat. Washington for him was "the place to get a low opinion of everybody in." He concluded that "the government of my country shuns honest simplicity, but fondles artistic villainy, and I think I might have developed into a very capable pickpocket if I had remained in public service a year or two." He turned down an influential postmastership in San Francisco on the ground that it would be "a falling from Grace . . . Government pap must be nauseating food for a *man*."

In a sketch called "Running for Governor," Twain showed how he was defeated by his opponent, a tool of the Erie Railroad, simply because the newspaper editors did not regard him as properly equipped to run the governorship corruptly. He switched parties freely looking for an honest man, and told the Knights of Saint Patrick in 1876 that we needed an American patriot to do for the U.S. what Saint Patrick had done for Ireland. "St. Patrick had no politics. . . . When he came across a reptile, he forgot to inquire whether he was a democrat or a republican. I wish we had him here to trim us up." The only solution to the purchase of civic virtue, to cite one of his political diatribes, was to give women the vote, and he was a longtime, if inconsistent, woman's suffrage enthusiast, even calling for a woman's party, although he saw that such a development would bring womanhood down off that cherished pedestal. But not even he foresaw Bella Abzug.

No doubt there was something clinical in Clemens's identifying so fully, in later life, with his persona Twain. This is, at least, the implicit view of his biographer Justin Kaplan in *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*. More serious, however, was his taking upon himself the burden of guilt for every mischance that occurred to him and his family. Quite irrationally he believed himself responsible for his brother Henry's death in a steamboat accident. He unaccountably accused himself of causing the death of his infant son Langdon, who died of natural causes. After he lost his money through poor investments, he had to lecture abroad to pay off the creditors. His daughter Susy died while he was abroad. Here Twain is consoling himself: "She died in our own house—not in another's, died where every little thing was familiar and beloved; died where she had spent all her life till my crimes made her a pauper and an exile." Thus our funniest national humorist was a man racked by self-accusation, remorse, a tormented conscience, and a morbid sense of sin and guilt.

The sign of these fused identities is the rage that led him to write those despairing works of the later years—"Corn-Pone Opinions" (1901), "Was It Heaven? Or Hell?" (1902), "Eve's Diary" (1905), "What Is Man?" (1906), and "Letters from the Earth" (1909). These pieces in the Library collection show him raging against God as "an irascible, vindictive, fierce and ever fickle and changeful master." The capricious Deity is the evil source of disease, pestilence, crime, and war who operates throughout history for purposes insane to man's reason. Twain also rails against "the damned human race" for being driven by self-interest, cowardice, and conformity and sees the moral history of the race as a succession of acts of violence, bloodshed, and murder from the story of Cain and Abel on up—progress signifying merely improvement in the instruments of destruction. It was an easy extension to transfer his hatred of the Creator to mankind—and to himself. "What a man sees in the human race is merely himself in the deep and honest privacy of his own heart," Twain wrote. "Byron despised the race because he despised himself. I feel as Byron did for the same reason." Thus the corruption of man and the determinism of cosmic events prevent any chance at a true amelioration of conditions: life is meaningless and conscience futile in a world where the Deity is really a cosmic Satan and man a contemptible worm.

To cope with his own obsessive duality of character and the horror of his inward existence, Twain invented, late in life, a dream self to account for the psychological phe-

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nomenon that he seemed to be two people. In his dreams, time and space were abolished and his spiritualized body could fly "to the ends of the earth in a millionth of a second. Seems to—and I believe *does*." In "Is Shakespeare Dead?" he quoted approvingly Prospero's lines "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, / And our little life is rounded with a sleep." By a natural extension he came to think that reality itself was oneiric, hallucinative, and nightmarish. He told Mrs. Crane late in life:

> I dreamed I was born and grew up and was a pilot on the Mississippi and a miner and a journalist in Nevada and a pilgrim in the *Quaker City*, and had a wife and children and went to live in a villa in Florence—and this dream goes on and on and sometimes it seems so real that I almost believe it is real. I wonder if it is. . . . I wish I knew whether it is a dream or real.

All of this late pessimism is fully represented in the Library edition. It of course emerges full blown in "Great Dark" and *The Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts, posthumously published, though unfinished, with their horrific portrait of God as the indifferent, amoral, cosmic devil who foreordains the violent events of human history. Paltry men are mere animalculae in the perspective of time, infectious microbes in the bloodstream of the cosmos. There is thus no efficacy in our having a conscience, which a sadistic God has given us only that we may torment ourselves, for life is a horror and death a blessing: sanity and happiness are an impossible combination. Beneath it all is an anguished cry for absolution. In the Library of America's collection of Twain's shorter pieces—ably edited and annotated by Emeritus Professor Louis J. Budd (who for many years gave the Duke English Department a scholarly distinction since tarnished by its New Age critical nihilists)—we have the full range of Twain's light-hearted burlesque, broadly farcical, hysterically satirical, and bitterly dark comedy. The collection is a rich rolling cart of the delectable little tarts with something—sharp or sweet—for everyone.

Prerogatives of genius

Meryle Secrest Frank Lloyd Wright. Knopf, 634 pages, $30

reviewed by Carter Wiseman

In her richly detailed biography of Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), Meryle Secrest recounts an anecdote that is at once laughable and chillingly typical of her subject. The scene is at Taliesin, the legendary house-cum-shrine the architect designed for himself in Spring Green, Wisconsin. One of his apprentices had crawled under the Steinway piano to do some repairs on the legs when Wright walked in. Unaware that anyone else was present, Wright tidied up a few things, then walked to the piano, "struck a few chords and pirouetted out of the room, singing to himself, 'I am the greatest.'"

Although on that occasion Wright made the claim in private, it was not one he usually kept to himself. As scores of writers on the subject have made clear, he was one of the most publicly arrogant architects on record. And as Meryle Secrest makes equally clear, he had his reasons. Wright's career as an architect lasted from the 1880s to the 1950s, spanning several generations and a host of architectural styles. From the Prairie Houses and the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo to Broadacre City and the Guggenheim Museum, he demonstrated an irrepressible originality and prolific output unchallenged by any other American architect.

As Secrest also makes clear, the man behind this prodigious production was a prodigiously complicated individual. The heir to a Welsh tradition of embattled opposition—"Truth Against the World" was his family's ancestral motto—Wright always considered himself an outsider, and was at his best, Secrest says, when "his back was to the wall." She reports that "the forefathers of Frank Lloyd Wright were tenacious fighters, with a way of surmounting seemingly impossible odds." True to their example, Wright made a career out of defiance. By turns solicitous and tyrannical, he was almost path-

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ologically irresponsible in dealing with bills, budgets, and personal relationships, but usually managed to wriggle out of the consequences.

In doing so, Wright demonstrated a consistent need to enlarge himself, whether by grandiose statements, outlandish costumes (flowing capes and chamois underwear), or such small gestures as amplifying his initials to read "F. Ll. W." He also had an almost demonic need to dominate. Secrest describes in painful detail Wright's "narcissistic need for total and unconditional adoration from his nearest and dearest," and paints a picture of his coterie at Taliesin West as something closely resembling an Eagle's Nest of toadies. He was so angered by defiance in others that he instantly banished any who expressed the slightest doubt about his supremacy—or even expressed some architectural independence. He was dead set against tobacco and once fired a Taliesin apprentice on the spot for smoking a cigarette.

Secrest's Wright was notoriously vain, and childishly petty. He was devoted to the underdog, but could turn viciously on old friends. Although a devoted apprentice to Louis Sullivan, Wright proclaimed himself an artist free of influence, and was quick to take credit for the work of others. Secrest notes that roughly 90 percent of what the world considers Wright drawings from the 1930s were done by his acolyte John Howe, a fact that did not deter Wright from stamping them with his own mark.

Secrest's greatest contribution to the long list of works on Wright is her attention to his personal complexities. She offers some convincing analysis of the role Wright's mother played in forging his conviction that he was "predestined" for greatness, and that "whatever he did was a work of genius, because he did it." Secrest is especially sensitive in portraying the other women in Wright's life. In describing his second wife, Miriam Noel, Secrest writes: "She would have been well aware that there was no end to his need for uncritical acceptance, praise and reassurance, and that any woman close to him had made a bargain: to give up her own sense of herself in order to live a life through him, have no thoughts but his, no needs but his, no life outside his own."

In today's political climate, one hesitates to say that this account of Wright's life benefits from having been written by a woman, but it does, and it is a welcome change from some of the previous male assessments, which have tended to take Wright on as if he were an opponent to be diminished or defeated. Secrest does not hesitate to judge her subject, but she also accepts the fact that he was "the most un-self-aware of men." Wright was, she says, "incapable of living alone and would always look for an immediate replacement once 'the woman' was out of his life." She movingly documents the toll taken on the wounded consorts, recounting with sympathy the impact of Wright's "readiness to flatten the first sign of feminine mutiny." And she deftly outlines the way in which Wright's last wife, Olgivanna, managed to manipulate his vanity to her own ends with a combination of flattery and confrontation.

Documentation is one thing, but speculation is another, and rather too often Secrest strays into psycho-biography without a well-drawn map. How much faith can we put in her assertion that Wright's mother's alleged sense that her husband did not love her enough was the reason she "turned on Frank the full force of her starved emotional needs"? It is a theme that recurs: "So perhaps a great deal of Wright's hopes were bound up with his mother's failed relationship. He would build anew, create a more perfect life to compensate them both for past unhappiness." Maybe, maybe not. Secrest refers repeatedly to Wright's "emotional insecurity" as one source of his almost superhuman drive, but others might argue that Wright, with his strong maternal backing, was more secure than most. As Brendan Gill, another biographer of Wright, has written of Cole Porter: "Not all mamma's boys have been great men, but a remarkable number of great men have been mamma's boys." And, one might add, not all of them were insecure.

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Even if questionable, Secrest's speculations make provocative reading, but the total tale would have profited from tighter editing. There are all too many abrupt transitions, and a frequent piling on of quotes, details, and anecdotes where a selection of the choicest ones would have made the point more efficiently.

In some portions of the book, this seems to be an attempt to compensate for a lack of authority on Wright's line of work. When Secrest deals with his architecture, she tends to defer to established commentators, including Vincent Scully and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, rather than make her own case. One area in which she adds substantially to the architectural account, though, is in strengthening the evidence of Wright's links to the English Arts and Crafts movement. But she correctly avoids suggesting that Wright was a mere product of his predecessors. One of his greatest talents, Secrest argues, was his ability to synthesize what had gone before and give the result an entirely new identity.

What is missing from Secrest's treatment of Wright as an architect is readily available in the writing of others. What comes through her account with fresh force is Wright's quintessential qualities of American-ness. Whatever the influence of his Welsh heritage, Wright was dedicated to the fundamental American ideas of the home as a family shrine, and the land on which it stood as the source of human strength and dignity. He was, in the end, a classic combination of the pioneer and the entrepreneur.

And Wright was all but unconquerable. He survived two divorces, the grisly murder of a mistress, the destruction—twice—by fire of his home, numerous brushes with bankruptcy, prosecution under the Mann Act (prohibiting "White Slave Traffic"), investigation by the FBI, and social and professional ostracism. He also triumphed over the revolution in architectural taste brought on by European modernism in the 1920s and 1930s, a revolution that threatened to end his career. Consider only that in the nine years before he died at the age of ninety-one, Wright executed 300 commissions, 135 of which were built, accounting for almost one third of his life's work.

Some writers have succumbed to the temptation to wallow in the details of Wright's almost incredible arrogance and caddishness and charge them against his stature as an artist. One might as well dock Rembrandt for being less than a gentleman to his assistants, or Brunelleschi for skipping Mass. Secrest quotes Wright as saying in 1911 during the notorious affair with the wife of one of his clients: "I think when a man has displayed some spiritual power, has given concrete evidence of his ability to see and to feel the higher and better things of life, we ought to go slow in deciding he has acted badly." For all the outrage this book chronicles, it also confirms the perpetrator's rightful claim on the word "genius."

And he is with us still. The passions evoked over the recent renovation of the Guggenheim Museum are a pointed reminder of that. Moreover, the passage of time has vindicated his attacks on the mechanistic obsessions of modernism. And since postmodernism has failed to fulfill its promise as a successor, we might do well to ponder again Wright's faith in his chosen art as one that should draw its inspiration from nature. Even if one rages at Secrest's record of his behavior, one is hard-pressed to condemn a man who added so much to the world's artistic legacy and who, shortly before he died, could still tell a hostile audience: "I am what I am. If you don't like it, you can lump it."

Membership & memory

Wendell Berry Fidelity: Five Stories. Pantheon, 201 pages, $20

reviewed by Bruce Bawer

Since the appearance of his first novel, *Nathan Coulter*, in 1960, Wendell Berry's fiction, poetry, and essays alike have spoken with increasing directness to a single theme:

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the relationship between man and earth. In the poem "The Old Elm Tree by the River," he asserts that "In us the land enacts its history"; "An Anniversary" makes clear that the reverse is true as well: "What we have been becomes / The country where we are." To Berry, a Kentucky farmer who tills the same land his family has worked for generations, man's proper role is that of steward; yet in his view, most Americans, in this "self-exploiting, world-exploiting age," are blind to the interdependence of man and earth, and live their lives "in the midst of a ubiquitous damned mess of which we are at once the victims and the perpetrators." All that technology has done is to "save" us "from work that is meaningful and ennobling and comely" and to replace it with "work that is unmeaning and degrading and ugly." Worst of all, we have lost the sense of mystical connection with others, past and present, that farm work gives; by working on the land, Berry writes in "Healing," "we clasp the hands of those who go before us, and the hands of those who come after us."

The unfortunate side of all this is that Berry can sound like an anti-humanist ecology nut of the first water. A character in his story "The Wild Birds" describes people and other natural phenomena as "members of each other. All of us. Everything." Berry's notion of "membership," of course, recalls Saint Paul: "For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Romans 12:4-5). Yet his work, while full of biblical echoes, hardly conveys a conventionally Christian view of things: though the word "stewardship," of course, implies a special relationship between man and his Maker, Berry tends to see man less as a favored child of God than as an element of the natural order whose political history and cultural heritage are only a part of the planet's ecological record, and whose achievements should be esteemed to the degree that they exist in harmony with the ecosystem. Berry isn't impressed by scientific progress, and (though he allows for the possibility of an afterlife) doesn't speak of salvation: to him life isn't linear, moving toward an end, but cyclical. The means *are* the end. Words like "grace," "mystery," and "transcendence" appear frequently in his writings, but when he uses them his focus is invariably more on earth than on heaven; he sees the spiritual as inherent in, but almost never pictures it apart from, nature. Like orthodox Christians, he believes that "life is bigger/ Than flesh," but he suggests that we transcend the particular conditions of mortal existence not by accepting Christ as savior but by recognizing that we are a part of the eternal whole, that we belong not to ourselves but to the earth, and that the things we bring into being are not ours alone but belong to all. (Accordingly, in his poem "The Country of Marriage," he describes the poem itself as being "no more mine than any man's who has loved a woman.") One is tempted to describe his philosophy as transcendentalism minus self-reliance, or as Wordsworth plus work. In any event, the essential difference between Berry's viewpoint and that of an orthodox Christian is made clear in his best novel, *A Place on Earth* (1967, revised 1983), when the local preacher drops by Max Feltner's house to offer consolation after his son, Virgil, is reported missing in World War II:

> The preacher's voice, rising, rides above all chances of mortal and worldly hope, hastening to rest in the hope of Heaven.
>
> In the preacher's words the Heavenly City has risen up, surmounting their lives, the house, the town—the final hope, in which all the riddles and ends of the world are gathered, illuminated, and bound. This is the preacher's hope, and he has moved to it alone, outside the claims of time and sorrow, by the motion of desire which he calls faith. In it, having invoked it and raised it up, he is free of the world.
>
> But in this hope—this last simplifying rest-giving movement of the mind—Mat realizes that he is not free, and never has been. He is doomed to hope in the world, in the bonds of his own love. He is doomed to take every chance and desperate hope of hope between him and death, Virgil's, Margaret's, his. His

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> hope of Heaven must be the hope of a man bound to the world that his life is not ultimately futile or ultimately meaningless, a hope more burdening than despair.
>
> It is from this possibility of meaninglessness that the preacher has retreated. So that the earth will not be plunged into the darkness, he has lifted up the Heavenly City and hastened to refuge in its gates. And Mat, in the very act of leaning toward that restfulness, turns away from it to take back his pain. His mind seems to steady and move out again to its surfaces. He watches Hannah and Margaret, anxious for them, sorry for their sorrow. He is conscious again of the room, the window, the wet street opening into the town. The buds on the maple trees leaning over the road have grown big. He notices this as he always notices it for the first time in the spring, with an involuntary pleasure, saying to himself that he is surprised to see it happen so early.

Berry leaves little doubt here where his own sympathies lie: he feels that true deliverance from human anguish is found not by denying one's finitude but by embracing it. In his view, the preacher retreats from life's fundamental realities and struggles to dispel his dread through an act of will; Mat confronts those realities and, in the midst of anguish, is surprised by joy. Berry's point here is that Mat, by leading a productive life on the earth and attending to the rhythms of nature, is occupying his proper place in the scheme of things, is accordingly capable of recognizing his role in the eternal order, and is thus, even in times of extreme adversity, able to find peace, comfort, and—yes—pleasure.

And what about those who do not live on the land? That's where Berry comes in. He is an evangelist, bringing to city folk the Good News of man's harmony with nature. This makes for some self-glorifying rhetoric: in an unrhymed sonnet that is prefaced to his 1988 novel, *Remembering*, Berry invokes the "Heavenly Muse, Spirit who brooded on / The world and raised it shapely out of nothing," and asks that spirit to "Keep my mind within that Mind / Of which it is a part, whose wholeness is / The hope of sense in what I tell." He describes the world as something whose sense has been fragmented, its body broken, its wholeness scattered, and begs the spirit to "Rule my sight by vision of the parts / Rejoined." There is—dare one say it?—something rather Christian in Berry's implication here that life is an exile from and a journey to some greater harmony, and that the key to emancipation from a sense of life's meaninglessness resides not, strictly speaking, in nature itself but in man's recognition that he belongs to, is part of, and is dependent upon a creative intelligence apart from nature and larger than himself. Berry even uses a biblical text as an epigraph to *Remembering*: "to him that is joined to all the living there is hope" (Ecclesiastes 9:4). In thus suggesting that man, by virtue of his capacity to think and believe, to make decisions and create novels, might well be closer to his Creator than, say, a rock or a tree, Berry would seem to be contradicting the notion, implicit elsewhere in his work, that it is through nature and nature alone that man partakes of the eternal.

Berry's ideas about man and earth underlie all his fiction, most notably the series of books set in and around the imaginary hamlet of Port William, Kentucky, and the nearby town of Hargrave. Yet the value of these books lies not in his communication of those ideas, but in his sensitive evocation of his characters' lives, his alertness to the nuances of human feelings and relationships. The first book in the series, the very fine short novel *Nathan Coulter*, regards Port William and environs from the perspective of the eponymous boy protagonist, who over a period of months watches his family become reconfigured. First his mother dies; then his father gives him and his brother, Tom, over to the care of their grandparents and their good-natured, ne'er-do-well Uncle Burley, who live elsewhere on the family farm; finally Tom, who has begun to show an interest in girls and to distance himself from Nathan, comes into open conflict with their father and runs away from home. In its

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gentle, luminous particularity, the book is rather reminiscent of William Maxwell's novels of Midwestern boyhood. Like Maxwell, Berry impresses one with his vivid, meticulous reconstruction of a child's growing awareness of life's mysteries. In his low-key, matter-of-fact way, Berry makes us ever conscious of the gradually expanding limits of Nathan's comprehension, and conscious too of the things that lie just beyond those limits.

To move from *Nathan Coulter* to *A Place on Earth* is to feel as if the camera has been pulled back: though the Coulters reappear here, they are only one of several families whose lives Berry chronicles over a period of several months. The novel, much longer than its predecessor, is set some years later. Among its signal achievements is its perceptive, deeply affecting account of Mat Feltner's continuously shifting state of mind during the weeks after his son Virgil is declared missing in action. To be sure, Berry eventually missteps: near the end of the book, Mat's wife asks him what he's thinking about; he replies "Loss," and they discuss the subject with an implausible articulateness and philosophical detachment that makes one feel as if Berry is feeding Mat his lines. But for the most part, this is a beautiful book, the sort of novel that Maxwell might have written had someone asked him, say, for a companion piece to *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Indeed, one might well observe of these first two Port William novels, as Dick Allen has said of Berry's poems, that they glow with "great and good simplicities" and "are endangered by sentimentality, but escape into wisdom." Time and again—as when Burley, in *A Place on Earth*, remembers how after his mother's death he burned postcards and letters and photographs that were "dear to her for reasons that would never be known again in the world"—Berry finds precisely the right words to capture the texture and meaning of a human experience. One cannot read these books without being reminded repeatedly of how rare and valuable is Berry's careful attention to earthly particulars, large and small, and to the eternal things of which they speak.

Both *Nathan Coulter* and *A Place on Earth* are books of memory, drawing on Berry's recollections of the Kentucky of his childhood. In his two later (and quite short) Port William novels, memory becomes an explicit theme—and Berry's ideas about man and earth are set forth with increasing bluntness. *The Memory of Old Jack* (1974) records the last day on earth of Jack Beecham, during which he thinks back over the major events of his life, notably his marriage to a well-born woman who could never understand or accept his satisfaction with the life of a hard-working dirt farmer. Throughout his fiction, Berry has a tendency to let conflicts fade away or disappear—as, of course, they often do in life—rather than bring them to a head; if *Old Jack* has a major flaw, it is that Berry doesn't do enough dramatically with the tension between Jack and his wife, who live together in mutual frustration, each remaining, to a tragic extent, a mystery to the other. Fortunately, the merits of this novel are considerable—most notably, that Berry makes a flesh-and-blood man, sympathetic in spite of his obstinacy, out of potentially stereotypical materials.

Less successful is Berry's most recent novel, *Remembering*, in which Andy Catlett, a young farm journalist in San Francisco, becomes exasperated by the careerist, progress-happy agricultural establishment and returns home to Port William. Here, for the first time in a Port William novel, Berry seems more interested in communicating opinions than in portraying sympathetic characters in plausible situations; the opening episode, set at a conference on agricultural policy, paints the ideological conflict between Andy and his adversaries in broad, unsubtle strokes. Nor does Berry engender any suspense by, for example, dramatizing Andy's increasing disillusion and his indecision as to whether he should return home; it's clear early on that he'll end up back in Port William. To be sure, Berry's chief interest here is not in Andy's internal conflict but in the memories that preoccupy him—memories, for the most part, of his family and neighbors—and Berry's purpose is patently

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to impress upon us the contrast between the good, hard-working country people who do much of the nation's farming and the slick, self-seeking urban "experts" in agricultural policy whose decisions can change those people's lives.

If all this isn't as effective as Berry might wish, it is because Port William and its denizens are rendered with a self-conscious, almost self-parodic simplicity and sentimentality that at times recall some of the later works of Hemingway. To be sure, there are some fine touches here, as when Berry (in a rare excursion into space-age America) uses the characteristically odd emphases of a flight attendant—"Flight 661 *has* now been accessorized, and is ready *for* passenger boarding *through* the jetway *at* gate eleven"—to symbolize the unnaturalness of airplane travel and of modern life in general. Yet Berry is so determined to drive home the decency and quiet diligence of Port Williamites that he seems loath to make them human, to show us their dark side; at times this book's scenes from rural life come across like so many Grant Wood paintings. And inclined though one is to agree with Berry's verdict on agricultural officials who think that "the answers [are] in the universities and the corporate and government offices, not in the land or the people," his glib derision of them sounds like nothing so much as the campaign rhetoric of some savvy congressional candidate out to win the farm vote.

Fidelity, Berry's newest book, is a collection of stories, the second in the Port William series. (The first, published in 1986, was *The Wild Birds: Six Stories of the Port William Membership*.) Alas, *Fidelity* reaffirms one's sense that Berry has become less concerned with capturing his characters' lives on the earth than with making tendentious statements about such lives. In the first story, "Pray without Ceasing," Andy Catlett tells how his great-grandfather Ben Feltner was shot dead, many years ago, by Ben's friend Thad Coulter. Though the townspeople wanted to lynch Thad, Ben's son Mat appeared at a town meeting and prevailed upon them not to do so. "I wish you could have seen him," Andy recalls his grandmother saying; rather affectedly, Andy tells us that "now, after so many years, perhaps I have. I have sought that moment out, or it has sought me, and I see him standing without prop in the deepening twilight, asking his father's friends to renounce the vengeance that a few hours before he himself had been furious to exact." In any event, the lynching proved unnecessary, for the next day Thad hanged himself in his cell—after which, we are to understand, everyone in Port William lived harmoniously ever after, including the Feltner and Coulter families, who remained good friends.

Part of Berry's purpose here is to show how crime is properly handled in a community with a strong sense of "membership." In such a place, he believes, the involvement of civil authorities in citizens' lives represents an assault upon the community's unwritten covenant. Yet of course Berry stacks the deck, arranging things so that everyone behaves properly after the murder. But what if everything didn't work out quite so neatly? What if an anguished Mat approved of the lynching? What if some townsmen chose to disregard Mat's wishes and lynched Coulter anyway? What if Thad didn't kill himself? Had Berry chosen to take the story in any of these directions, it would have been harder to hide from the fact that, in the real world, one man's actions *can* destroy the harmony of a community and ordinarily decent people can, under pressure, act like barbarians. Here and elsewhere, Berry demonstrates an unwarranted degree of faith in the innate goodness of country people; in his view, rural murder would almost appear to be an act of innocence, and evil something strictly associated with cities.

Berry gives another thumbs-up for Port William values in "Fidelity," the book's longest story. Burley Coulter, now an octogenarian, is about to shuffle off this mortal coil, and his illegitimate son Danny Branch (who, of all the folks in Port William, "most clearly saw [the modern world] as his enemy—as *their* enemy—and most forth-

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rightly and cheerfully repudiated it") sneaks him out of the hospital and carries him to a place in the woods where he can die in nature. When a detective named Kyle Bode shows up to investigate Burley's disappearance, the Coulters' lawyer friend Henry Catlett lectures Bode about how people "belong to each other and to God," not to the state, and says "I'm not going to cooperate with you in this case because I don't like what you represent." (Which law school, one wonders, did he go to?) Bode doesn't stand a chance against the Catlett rhetoric. For once again, Berry has loaded the dice: not only is Bode unusually hostile to nature ("Kyle Bode objected to hills and hollows. He objected to them especially if they were all overgrown with trees. They offended his sense of the way things ought to be"), he is also unusually dense, not at all a fair opponent for Berry's town full of articulate children of the earth.

Berry is, in fact, so glib here about so many complex matters—he writes, for example, that by giving Burley "over to 'the best of modern medical care'" his relatives have "abandoned him"—that readers may find themselves shaking their heads in irritation. Bode, moreover, proves to be little more than a clumsily contrived assemblage of clichés about contemporary liberal "lifestyles"; and Berry, who might once have regarded such a man as spiritually deprived and thus deserving of pity rather than ridicule, exhibits surprisingly little charity toward him: when the Catletts lecture the man condescendingly about love and mercy, Berry plainly approves. He doesn't seem to realize that if you want readers to like certain characters, you can't have them constantly talking about how loving and merciful they are and chiding other characters for failing to measure up.

Two briefer stories in *Fidelity* record less sensational incidents and celebrate rural solicitude. In "Are You All Right?", a couple of Port William men who haven't seen their neighbors for a while drop in to check on them; in "A Jonquil for Mary Penn," an ailing farm wife is pleased, on awakening, to find a friend watching her, for it means that her husband, who has gone to a neighbor's farm to help plow, cared enough about her to tell someone. Though these stories have a certain homely appeal, they're slight, unremarkable. More substantial is "Making It Home," in which Art Rowanberry, a newly demobilized soldier, finds his way down the rural roads back to Port William. At its best, the story renders Art's journey with a beauty and exactitude and suggestiveness that recall Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River"; at its worst, it sounds like bad Steinbeck, or even Saroyan: "'I ain't marching,' he thought. 'I am going somewheres. I am going up the river towards Hargrave. And this side of Hargrave, before the bridge, at Ellville, I will turn up the Kentucky River, and go ten miles, and turn up Sand Ripple below Port William, and I will be at home.'" At the end, there's even a facile biblical echo when Art's father bids a child to "Tell your granny to set on another plate. For we have our own that was gone and has come again."

To read *Fidelity* is to feel at times that Berry has become obsessed with the Port William citizenry in much the way that Salinger became obsessed with the Glass family, loving them so much that he lost all literary perspective on them. I have compared Berry to William Maxwell, but Maxwell's novels have more air and light and humor, broader sympathies, a fuller sense of life. Berry never examines or questions his philosophy, never creates a story where there's a tension between his much-exalted notion of "membership" and some other good. He fails to acknowledge that families don't always know best, that people often reject their progeny for appalling reasons, that adult children often have good cause not to want to be seen as "belonging" to their parents. He acts as if every question has a simple answer, every conflict a clear right and wrong. And he can come off as the worst kind of Luddite, ignoring the fact that agriculture has always changed in accordance with technological and scientific advances. Nor does he face up sufficiently to the ugly side of the Kentucky

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rural tradition: the slave cabin, the sharecropper's shack. (Incidentally, whatever one may think of smoking, it seems astonishing, given Berry's fanatic environmental concerns, that he shows no sign of being troubled by the fact that one of Port William's chief crops is tobacco. One can hardly avoid concluding that Berry doesn't mind if a crop damages people, so long as it doesn't hurt nature.)

The more one reads of Berry, too, the more claustrophobic and intolerant his view of the world seems. Much as there is to admire about a book of essays like *What Are People For?* (1990), Berry is more than a bit too confident that the purpose of his life is also necessarily the purpose of yours or mine, and that what enriches and inspires and animates him would do the same for you or me. Though he is eminently suited by temperament to a rural life, his fiction reflects a growing lack of sympathy for those who aren't thus suited and whose lives differ from his own. His philosophy makes no allowance for certain ways of thinking and feeling and loving; he seems unwilling to accept that the human family is full of differences, that they make life more interesting, and that it is in cities, not rural areas, that these differences tend to be most tolerated.

Yet *Fidelity* has its redeeming aspects. As ever, Berry's depiction of ordinary lives yields small shocks of recognition. In "Making It Home," for instance, when Art lies down to rest on his way to Port William, Berry captures, in a few words, the familiar feeling of simultaneous exhaustion and mental hyperactivity: "Many thoughts fled by him, none stopping. And then he slept." And in "Pray without Ceasing," Berry conveys the odd vulnerability that a patient's relatives feel *vis-à-vis* the hospital staff when he notes that Burley's doctor "spoke fluently from within the bright orderly enclosure of his explanation, like a man in a glass booth. And Nathan and Hannah, Danny and Lyda stood looking in at him from the larger, looser, darker order of their merely human love." There continues, moreover, to be a great deal about Berry's vision of human society that commends itself to readers. In "Pray without Ceasing," Andy says that he learned about his grandfather's death "without asking questions, both fearing the pain that I knew surrounded the story and honoring the silence that surrounded the pain." Honoring the silence: a refreshing notion in the age of Phil and Oprah. This is not the first time that Berry has written with sensitivity about how speaking too often of something precious dilutes it, sullies it, betrays it. But even an admirer cannot help asking: isn't Berry guilty of this himself? For *Fidelity* confirms one's unhappy impression that this very fine artist is devolving into a tiresome, predictable cheerleader for rural values.

Shorter notices

Charles J. Sykes A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character. St. Martin's Press, 289 pages, $22.95

What do you suppose is the common thread that links Rousseau, rap music, Anna Quindlen, the Americans with Disabilities Act, James Dean, Afrocentrism, Jeffrey Dahmer, support groups, Theodor Adorno, "self esteem" in education, Franz Kafka, Tawana Brawley, Abraham Maslow, the assailants of the Central Park jogger, Charles Reich, the litigation explosion, Andrea Dworkin, Sigmund Freud, the management of the New York Mets, Marion Barry, campus speech codes, John Bradshaw, Mike Tyson, codependency, and Mario Cuomo?

If you guessed that all of them appeal to or foster people's sense of grievance, confirm them in their claims to victim status, and undermine the social fabric, you are not only right but you can probably skip *A Nation of Victims*. For Charles Sykes, the author of *ProfScam* and *The Hollow Men*, here tries to tie together so many disparate things that just linking them all to what he comes to call "victimism" is about all that can be done with them. Oh, yes, besides saying how deplorable it all is and how we ought to stop it.

One's heart goes out to Sykes. He is so obviously on the right side and tries so hard to

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be fair and reasonable and to appeal to the good will of those who are not. He appears to imagine that his readers have just never realized before how bad things have become. Thus he occasionally makes concessive introductions like this: "The impulse to translate behavior into disease is not without some basis in fact," and, like a good college debater, he says what he would put in place of victimism—viz., a "culture of character." I wish I could believe that his appeals to reason and moderation would change any minds and not that what is wanted here is *saeva indignatio*.

The usefulness of the book is as a helpful compendium of victimology, a *sottisier* for our times. Here we meet again the man, fired for being unable to get to work on time, who sued his former employer for discrimination against the disabled because he suffered from "chronic lateness syndrome." There are reminders, too, of lawsuits resulting from bad haircuts or overbooked hotel rooms, of the famous University of Missouri School of Journalism handbook which advises against use of the word "burly" because it often refers to black men and of the crazier university rules against "lookism" etc. There is also a brief tour through the farther reaches of the therapeutic culture among the "victims" of overeating, overspending, and too much sex, among many others.

The familiarity of it all reminds us that, in the end, the attempt to make everyone a victim is a vulgar error, the sort of thing Sir Thomas Browne might have put under the rubric of "Pseudodoxia Epidemica." But Sykes in his earnestness tends to dump Rousseau and Goethe into the sin bin along with such lightweights as Joseph Fletcher and Charles Reich without ever pausing to reflect that the first two are geniuses and great men and the second two are, well, not.

European romanticism may be ultimately what is behind victimology, but victimology by itself is not enough to discredit European romanticism. There is a regrettable tendency among conservatives with not very much interest in intellectual history to read a book like Paul Johnson's *Intellectuals* and then tell you in a knowing way all about what a wrong 'un Rousseau was. Well, maybe so, but he has to be taken seriously. As for the stuff which does not, it is useful to have it collected in a ready source book like this one as a means of keeping one's anger at the public idiocies and corruptions of our time on the boil. For without such anger, nothing is ever likely to be done about them.

—James Bowman

Peter Kenez Cinema & Soviet Society, 1917-1953. Cambridge University Press, 281 pages, $59.95; $18.95 paper

Peter Kenez, author of a new book on Soviet film, is a historian at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He has paid a number of visits to the former Soviet Union, three months in 1977, two months in 1985, and time in Leningrad in 1988. In 1985 he published a book called *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*. Working on that subject led to his interest in Soviet films, of which he has viewed an impressive number, mostly at the Pacific Film Archives of the University of California at Berkeley. He also spent two months in the film archives in Budapest in 1987.

Kenez is mostly concerned with the years when Stalin held undisputed power. He concentrates on internal propaganda and fiction films, and his theme is familiar. The Bolsheviks, the first masters of propaganda in the twentieth century, were also the first to understand the importance of film as a medium of reaching the masses. "They did not mean to delude; they meant to educate." Under Lenin, "the great leader," they encouraged a fledgling Soviet film industry to produce works worthy of the revolutionary goals of the Soviet state. Young directors appeared whose masterpieces of cinematic art made the 1920s "the golden age," "the great age," of Soviet film. Inexorably, however, the clumsy hand of Stalin, the "frightful chief" of "a murderous political system," strangled to death this early creative impulse.

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But with Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet film revived "remarkably quickly" and "once again became worth watching."

It's hard to believe anyone still clings to this interpretation of Soviet history, which denies the logical continuity of the system's policies and practices from Lenin's coup d'état in 1917 to its collapse under Gorbachev. It gives a false coloration to Kenez's study and gets him into a muddle whenever he pronounces on aesthetic matters or tries to sort out fantasy from reality. His book would have been clearer and more useful if he had remembered that the driving principle of propaganda is expediency. How successful were films as propaganda? The opinion of most historians is that films did not count for much in war-time America and Britain, nor did they in Nazi Germany. Kenez is unable to answer for Soviet films, largely because, as he admits, it is difficult to obtain information about what ordinary Russians who went to the cinema felt about the films they saw, and about which films they enjoyed most. As a result, we get no more idea of Soviet popular culture outside the norms of the Party than we do of the key political events that determined those norms and the slogans they called for. Kenez's discussion of the topic is often somewhat unreal, like the discussions of Party cadres over the correct ideological criticism of scripts. An ambiguity runs throughout the book over the meaning of his term "Soviet society."

The task that Kenez set himself is not an easy one, and one must admire his stamina in viewing so many scores of films. His researches have yielded interesting material on the administration of the Soviet film industry at a time of intense ideological pressure. We learn how many films in the 1930s dealt with propaganda themes like saboteurs and foreign agents, how many (six) were anti-Nazi in the years between 1935 and 1939, and of the striking fact that none showed traitors in the year 1940. Also striking is what Kenez tells us about the immediate postwar years, when Soviet audiences "flocked to see" Tarzan adventures from Hollywood and German comedies made under the Nazis. He informs us that these "trophy films" had fallen into Soviet hands as the Red Army advanced into Germany and Eastern Europe. Why they were then allowed to be shown in the Soviet Union remains something of a mystery. It's ironic, too, to discover that studios in Prague, recently vacated by Leni Riefenstahl at work on her last "mountain" film, were put to immediate use by Soviet directors, their own still suffering from from the war's devastation. It's a pity Kenez did not add a chapter on the propaganda success of early Soviet films among foreign cinéastes, one that has influenced film studies to this day, or discuss the attitude of ruling classes in other countries toward the new medium. The British establishment, for one, was especially sensitive to its subversive potential (with an eye largely on the Soviet Union) and moved very early, as early as the Bolsheviks, to control content and censor imports.

For many years Jay Leyda's *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* was the only work on this subject available to English readers; first published in 1960, it appeared in an expanded edition in 1983. Leyda had the great advantage of working in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, when he met many of the directors mentioned by Kenez. Kenez's book is a useful addition to our knowledge, but it does not supplant Leyda's. Meanwhile, we must hope that it will not be long before Russian historians, freed at last from the old pieties and unrestricted in their use of their archives, will undertake a thorough reappraisal of the role of all artists, filmmakers included, who lent their talents to the support of the Soviet state.

—Jeremy Murray-Brown

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Letters

Henri Coulette

To the Editors:

We are writing to express our anger at Philip Levine's recent memoir-review of the late Henri Coulette and his *Collected Poems*, which was published in the first issue of *Common Knowledge* (Spring 1992). We are writing to *The New Criterion*—a journal in which Coulette's poems regularly appeared—because the editors of *Common Knowledge* have refused to open their pages to any response, even to a correction of the many misrepresentations of which Levine is guilty.

Levine and Coulette, once the closest of friends, were estranged for many years. Although Levine claims that he does not wish to say anything against his former friend or to damage his literary reputation, his essay is contrived to do precisely that. After some pages of seemingly affectionate reminiscence, sprinkled with errors, exaggerations and fantastic assertions, he introduces a dying young poet, whom he portrays in heroic and sentimental terms and from whose mouth is made to flow a series of malicious negative judgments of Coulette's character and achievement. Levine presumes that if any of us are offended by this ventriloquism, we shall have only the Dying Young Poet, now dead, to blame.

Henri Coulette is also dead and cannot defend himself. At a loss to understand why Levine should need in this way to diminish the reputation of a former friend and with no desire to speculate in public as to the nature of his motives, we wish only to respond with a statement of our indignation and sorrow.

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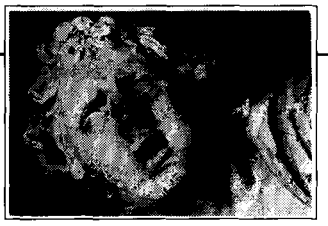

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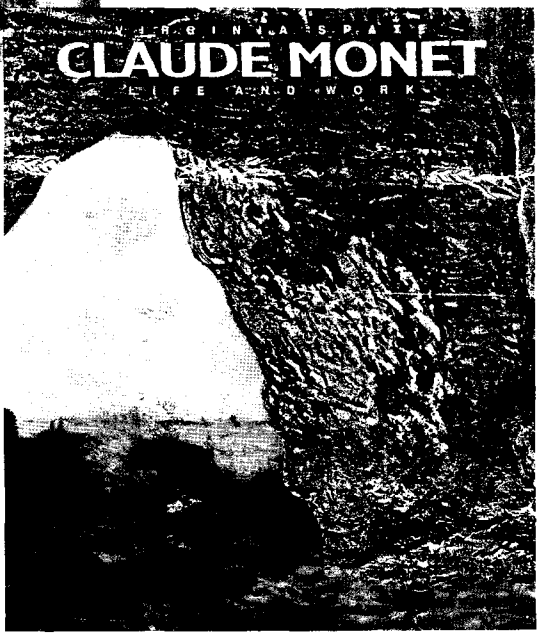

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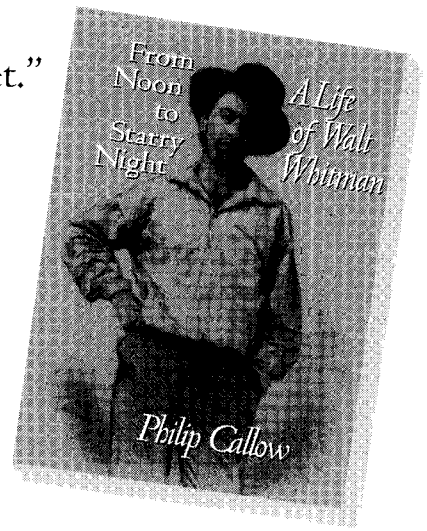

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